‘Self-knitted ear-warmers’

MAURITS VAN THIJN, AMSTERDAM, 1922
CATHARINA VAN THIJN-BLITZ, AMSTERDAM, 1924

Maurits: ‘We haven’t got children.’

Catharina: ‘We have nobody.’

Maurits: ‘But she has been acquainted with my family and I have been with hers. We can talk with each other about our fathers, mothers, uncles and aunts, grand-dads, grandma’s, cousins and nephews.’

Catharina: ‘All of whom are not there anymore. We just have each other, we are one body.’

Maurits: ‘And we uphold each other. When the one goes, the other goes...’

Catharina: ‘We know each other already almost our entire life.’

Mau and Rina van Thijn are drinking tea and eating fancy cakes while they are speaking of horrors and hardships. With great difficulty, painful – but having a try. Sometimes the tattooed number on the fore-arm appears from under a sleeve, wrinkled but irrevocable. ‘It should never be an excuse for a bad temper.’ After a restless life, and having returned from Israel, they now live in an adjacent apartment of Beth Shalom (Amsterdam-Buitenveldert), close to the Buitenveldert runway.4 Airplanes land and take off again, life-size, noisy, in front of their window. ‘Well, it gives us a fine little view!’

Maurits: ‘I became Catrien’s neighbour’s boy below when we moved in at the Afrikaner Square shortly before my bar mitswa. I saw her, as well as her sister, every day, passing the stairs.’

Chuckling: ‘But during my years as a boy I still disliked the girls next-door. They sang so annoyingly, with their high-pitched voices, and I always had to carry their bicycles upstairs, so my mother told me to do.’

Catharina: ‘Neither did I socialize with Mau and his brothers. Only with other girls. And I sang all day: I was a cheerful child.’

Maurits: ‘During the war we couldn’t leave home so often anymore; we were allowed less and less. Thus we obviously got more into contact.’

Catharina: ‘I became frightened for roundups – after work I immediately went home. During that dreary time we got friendly with each other. And he became my first boy-friend.’

Maurits smiles, and shakes his head: ‘A calf-love it still was...’

Catharina continues in a matter-of-fact tone: ‘When my parents and sisters were rounded up and taken away, I stayed at home alone – as a seamstress in the textile industry I was “gesperrt”

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2 Maurits van Thijn was born on May 16, 1922, in Amsterdam, and passed away on March 25, 2011, in Amsterdam.
3 Catharina van Thijn-Blitz was born on October 3, 1924 in Amsterdam. They lived in Israel from 1949 to 1998.
4 This is one the runways of Schiphol, Amsterdam International Airport.
Maurits: ‘That was my luck.’

Catharina: ‘But it ended sadly. The couple that helped us — and many others — with (hiding) addresses, betrayed us. The woman was presuming that her husband had an affair with one of the women in hiding. In a towering rage she went to the Germans — she had all the addresses.’

Maurits: ‘Catrien and I were warned by the son of the family with whom I was in hiding — we could get away just in the nick of time.’

Catharina: ‘But where did we have to go to?’

Maurits: ‘I went from home to home — with the courage born of desperation. I remember a woman, who hissed: “Get away soon, before my husband sees you! He is with the party.” I cycled around like this. I had painted my hair blond.’

Catharina looks at Maurits and smiles: ‘It was reddish instead of blond — but doesn’t matter.’

Maurits: ‘I found a little place for both of us in a small dead-end street, where all doors were open and everyone was always in and out of one another’s houses. As soon as we were inside and the door was closed, the woman next-door showed up and said: “Why do you lock the door? Surely there are Jews here!”’

Catharina: ‘So the next day we had to leave again. Ultimately we found ourselves with a poverty-stricken family with five daughters, somewhere completely out of the way, in the middle of the bulb-fields. Actually, they didn’t have room for a boy, but Mau could come anyhow when he joined the youngest in bed.’

Maurits is sitting up straight gladly: ‘For us they were: uncle Theun and aunt Annie. They had no electricity, no gas, no toilet — nothing at all. But they sang every day, with all these children; it was a delight to be there! Uncle Theun was in the employ of the big bulb-bosses for a low wage. Aunt Annie grew some vegetables, in addition to the bulbs, during the war years.’

Catharina: ‘Extraordinary lovely people, who didn’t do it for the money — which we didn’t have anyway.’

Maurits: ‘Everywhere around us people were working on the land. Catrien and I hardly ever came outside. When strangers came towards the little house, the neighbors, who looked out upon the street, warned us.’

Catharina: ‘One day, there was a knock on the door: “Neighbor, think of your time...”. We rushed to our hide-out: an old cupboard-bedstead, used as a closet, in which a little hatch had been made, that we could close from the inside. “You can come out again”, aunt Annie said a little later. “It has been successful.” Had we known that it was an exercise, we hadn’t been so quick in our rush.’

Maurits: ‘The Germans were still looking for us — we knew that for sure. So, every little noise at night woke us up.’

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6 ‘The Party’ is a reference to the NSB (Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging), the National-Socialist Movement in the Netherlands, founded by Anton A. Mussert in December 1931. In the last pre-war, free elections (Provincial Parliaments, 1939) the party had received less than four percent of the votes.

7 Hillegom is in the middle of the so-called Bulb Region (Bollenstreek) between Haarlem and Leiden. This region is very famous for its flower cultivation, flower bulb production and the blossoming flowers in every spring. This attracts a lot of tourists to the area, including the visitors center Keukenhof.
Maurits: 'We were married in our raincoats and both wearing a pair of trousers: soundly
dressed for the journey. And with unknown witnesses.'

Catharina: 'But that was not important. We had each other. Nothing else was important
anymore. Our surroundings didn’t matter anymore.'

Maurits: 'We were so resigned, after all the nervousness.'

Catharina: 'It was the 20th of September 1943...' Suddenly sober: 'Both of us received a
marriage certificate — can you imagine that!'

Maurits: 'We married in the afternoon and we went on transport that night. On honeymoon to
the East.'

Catharina: 'Together, between so many others, we stood in the cattle-trucks.'

Maurits: 'On September 23, a misty, early morning, we arrived in Auschwitz.'

Catharina: 'Everybody out of the train. Men and women apart. By coincidence we were in one
of the first wagons — there were dozens. They have counted one hundred married women, and I —
just married — was among them. They were the only women of that transport who were
transferred to the camp. The rest was annihilated immediately...'

After a silence: 'My hair came off, I had to undress, put on prison clothes. A number was
tattoed on my fore-arm. I was called 63250. My old name was forgotten.'

Maurits: 'I became 152103. I had already been shaven bold in Westerbork. In Auschwitz I
received a far too large striped coat and trousers, with a yellow-red star of David.'

Catharina: 'With the group of married women I was taken to the Experimentenblock. To Block
10. There were also already hundreds of others there; I was frightened by all those bald heads
together — those heads without nothing... — of these women on their bunk beds, like animals in
their cages — a sinister sight. And I didn’t see my Mau anywhere anymore. He had been taken to
an Aussenlager.'

Maurits: 'To Monowitz. A hell. Indescribable. Twelve hours work per day. In the cold. We
slept in tents — even shacks hadn’t been set up yet. One early morning we were provoked. SS-
men said that one of us had done a pee in the corner of the tent, which was not true at all. And
that, therefore, all of us would get twenty-five strokes with a stick. I reported voluntarily: I had
supposedly done it, otherwise all of us would be whipped. Then they threatened to hang me. The
rope was made ready. There I stood... in utter agony and with mortal fear. Until two strong boys
reported and said that the SS-men shouldn’t hang me. “Give us the strokes with the stick.” And
they got them: twenty-five. As punishment I, with someone else, had to empty coal-trucks. The
one of us who finished last was also to get twenty-five strokes, so I worked tremendously. Then,
I didn’t get the strokes with the stick. Not then...'

Catharina: 'Calm down, Mau.'

Maurits, a break in his voice: ‘... I...’

Catharina: 'Later, yes. He got so many strokes with the stick. But Mau doesn’t talk about that.
He can’t. He never talks about the camp.'

10 The various forced labor camps, which administratively belonged to a concentration camp, were called
Aussenlager (‘Outside-camps’).
to shoot dead someone now and then. Daily we returned with dead people, whom we had to carry ourselves — Arbeit macht frei...

But when I returned from work I could see her, from afar. And, only for a moment, at the risk of life, I could greet her.

Catharina: ‘He saw me, in the Experimenten-Block. And I saw him, outside there — I looked out for this the whole day.’

Maurits: ‘I wasn’t allowed to be around there. The Germans saw everything from their watch-towers. I remember that, once, they aimed a rifle at me.’

Catharina: ‘Only because he was waving to the women’s block! We didn’t live anymore, we were lived. In the long run, our brains hardly functioned anymore. Ultimately, Mau ended up in the Union ammunitions factory. There, his situation improved a little bit.’

Maurits: ‘Looking at your number they see how long you have been in the camp; they don’t respect you, but they do understand that you have persevered already for a while. The German craftsman was a nice man, though he called me Käsekopf (cheese head). I had to work hard, but for the rest I was left alone. In a small, closed space of the ammunitions factory — I was in the night shift — I had to remove rustiness from grenade shells, using undiluted sulfuric acid and hydrochloric acid. If you entered that section, you hardly had oxygen, but you did receive extra food. If you could stand it and didn’t choke in the stuffy, oppressed atmosphere, it could save you. But my teeth were affected; I always had a toothache.

I ended up in another shack. It was bearable there. Our Blockälteste was a Dutchman who had fought against Franco11 as a volunteer: Anton Jansen, from Hilversum. He was good for us; sometimes he withheld soup in favor of us.’

Furiously: ‘No, then there were the Kapo’s: murderers and swindlers. Criminals! Antisemitic inside out. And they had to guard us!’

Catharina: ‘Yet, almost every evening Mau sneaked to a spot from where you could see our Block.’

Maurits smiles: ‘I saw her from afar. “She is there.” That was it.’

Catharina: ‘The distance was too far to catch sight of each other’s eyes.’

Maurits: ‘But we recognized each other.’

Catharina: ‘Meanwhile, the women in my Block knew Mau also. “Catrien van Thijn, your husband is there!” and then I ran to that one corner in our barrack from where I could see him. And I could wave to him for a moment.’

Maurits: ‘As far as I know, we were the only married couple still alive, in the long run. There had been more married couples, but death notices came in all the time.’

Catharina: ‘In Block 10 they did experiments with us. For the rest we didn’t work — we were only used for the experiments. Kapo’s were looking for girl friends among us; there were women

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11 During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) large parts of the Spanish army revolted and fought against the democratically elected, left-wing republican government. Thousands of volunteers from many European countries went to Spain to fight in support of the Republic. The monarchist general Francisco Franco, who was in charge of the revolting army, received support from fascist Italy and Nazi-Germany. Franco won the war in April 1939 and ruled as a dictator in Spain until his death, at the age of 83, in 1975.
Maurits, in astonishment: ‘Once, when I was in the camp for a longer time already, I had the nerve to step up to an SS-man. On the first impulse. I asked that SS-man: “I beg you pardon. My wife is in the Experimenten-Block; could I perhaps pay her a visit once?” How can you do such a thing? But the SS-man said: “Come with me!”.’

Catharina: ‘A humane trait.’

Maurits: ‘Then I was allowed to come to her in her Block, for two minutes, and talk with her. That was unbelievable!’

Catharina: ‘We could give each other one kiss, I don’t remember more – you are, so to say, numb in the camp. When we women of the Experimenten-Block were allowed to take a shower once in the three months, men were looking at us through half-open doors. You couldn’t care anymore.’

Maurits: ‘Later, when things went worse and worse for the Germans, things became a little better for us. When we had to work at night, we didn’t have to stand during roll-call outside anymore, we were allowed to stand inside.’

Catharina: ‘In 1944, when the Germans felt that they were going to lose, they turned a number of barracks into model-barracks, including ours. They were to look a little better in the future. We received a new Block, just outside Auschwitz. There they also continued with their experiments on us, but we had decent beds and blankets. But: in that model-barrack I didn’t see Mau anymore of course.’

Maurits: ‘Soon after, we took another road to the factory. Purely coincidence.’

Catharina: ‘Sheer luck. I still remember standing for a window and suddenly I saw Mau again! He rose his hand, I waved back... By chance he precisely passed our Block; I saw him every day again. That was encouraging. I couldn’t throw bread to him, there were too many guards. But via Appie I could give bread to Mau again – and even small letters. And since the Kapos liked to come to our new barrack often, where they had more room with their girl-friends, I continued knitting and earning for Mau.’

Maurits: ‘Somehow I had managed to get a piece of pencil. During work I quickly wrote a small letter to Catrien: Be strong, I am well... Suddenly a German Meister stood in front of me: one with huge hands, I still remember. “Was machst du?!” (What are you doing?!) he yelled. I honestly said that I wrote a letter to my wife. The one moment they beat you to death for nothing, the other moment such a German says: “Mach’ mal weiter” – I could simply write on!”

Catharina: ‘It became January 18, 1945. Then we all had to evacuate.’

Maurits: ‘Because of the approaching Russians. That evacuation lasted until May and was many times worse than Auschwitz itself.’

Catharina: ‘Mau began with the death marches from the factory, I from the Experimenten-Block; we lost sight of each other. They were literally death marches: endless walking, through the cold – whether you carried shoes or not, you had to go on.’

Maurits: ‘On and on, through the snow. The one time on foot, the other in open cattle-trucks.’

Catharina: ‘We were in a wagon with one bread, with so many women. We didn’t have anything to drink; I sipped up snow, that I first melted in my hand.’
Nettie, with whom I had shared a bed in the Experimenten-Block — and meanwhile my bosom friend — was infected with typhoid fever at that time. She became more and more ill. I fed her little bits with my spoon in the end. I still wonder at the fact that I was not infected with typhoid myself. Nettie didn’t make it. She died after we had already been liberated, when everything was all done with at long last! It was dreadful for me… She had been everything for me in our Block.

A group of Dutch forced laborers came to look whether there were also Dutch women, and whether we went with them to the deserted village, a short distance away, to loot the shops. I went with them, as far as I could still walk. And then it appeared that I was not normal anymore. We came in a chemist’s shop and there the first thing I took was a lipstick. Isn’t that strange? I had never used lipstick in my life. I didn’t know what I was doing anymore; I could have taken anything.”

Maurits: ‘You wanted to return pretty for me, of course.’

Catharina: ‘The forced laborers had found a baby-carriage somewhere, which they loaded full completely. And what did I take? Two silk peignoirs, a soft-yellow one and a Japanese one — what should I do with that?!! And a pair of shoes for Mau, which I gave away to a woman on bare feet.

The Dutch forced laborers had made a small carriage, with which they walked towards the Americans. They wanted to go back to their families as soon as possible. Whoever wanted, could join them. We were sitting on the small carriage in turns. After a day’s walking we arrived at the Americans. From there we were transported to the town of Enschede.14 Together with three others, I belonged to the first Jewish women who arrived back in the Netherlands on May 14, 1945. And there was nobody who officially welcomed us! But, yes, we were deloused. Of course we were filthy; we could not have washed ourselves for months. One of the forced laborers, who had earned extra money as a tailor, in addition to his work, had become stinking rich with German Reichsmarks. But when the war had ended, these Reichsmarks were of no use to him anymore. Now that we finally got something to eat again, I was troubled with a diarrhea of course. That forced laborer gave me a sheaf of Hundertmarkscheine banknotes: “Take that…” — the most expensive toilet paper I ever used.

Since we were not yet allowed to go to Amsterdam, I temporarily stayed with the family of one of the forced laborers in Eindhoven. Only on June 1, I could leave.

When I arrived at Afrikaner Square in Amsterdam where I had lived, I saw many people behind the windows. They were waiting and watching: will anybody come back…? Next to our neighbors upstairs there lived a Christian man who had married a Jewish woman and had converted to Judaism. During the war he had converted back to the church in which he had been born, so that he was declared ‘Aryan’ again and his wife and children were left in peace. That family still recognized me as their former neighbor girl. They gestured me to come over to them. That is what I did. I slept in their attic. Where else should I go to?

Some days later, I heard that people had returned from the camps; I immediately went out to look. There was somebody who claimed to have been in Auschwitz. “Did you know Maurits van

14 Enschede is a Dutch town in the Twenthe region, in the east of the Netherlands, very close to the German border.
Catharina: ‘With people in our street, where we were having a cup of tea, I suddenly saw my father’s home-made ashtray. It had been his pride, an ashtray in the shape of a hat, with a small cigar on top.’

Maurits, outraged: ‘They had found it; supposedly...’

Catharina: ‘Father’s ashtray is the only thing we got back after the war.’

Maurits: ‘We went to the Friesland province, to an uncle and aunt who had been in hiding, to put on weight. We were very skinny. Later, we lived with a female cousin who was married with a Christian man.’

Catharina, angry: ‘We didn’t have a house. We had nothing. And the Dutch government didn’t help us.’

Maurits: ‘You had to be registered to get a dwelling. So, there was nothing for us. Until, in December we heard, accidentally, from Christian people that their daughter had married, and had received an NSB-dwelling.’

Catharina: ‘Then, we asked: “How can this be? We still have nothing.” Well, we had to go to this or that civil servant, who distributed dwellings.’

Maurits: ‘Officially, again there still was no dwelling for us. Then we heard: “You should go to his house and offer him money”.’

Catharina: ‘But we didn’t have any money. Upon arrival in the Netherlands we had received ten guilders. That was all.’

Maurits: ‘Yet, I went to that civil servant’s house; meanwhile it was December 1945. I rang the bell and said: “I come for a dwelling.” “Sh-sh!”’, he said. “The money is good, isn’t it?”, I asked. “Well then, come in. It’ll cost you so and so much.” “That’s O.K.” First, I was offered a small dwelling of only one room. I went back: “I said that the money is good.” Then we got an NSB-dwelling that was still painted red-black.’

Catharina: ‘Including even the dustpan and brush, and the pans, all was in the NSB-colors.’

Maurits: ‘Even if I had had money, I wouldn’t have given it to that civil servant. When I started nosing about in that house, I found a photograph of the NSB-member in German uniform. After a year I had to return to that civil servant. “I am sorry”, he said, “but the gentleman who has lived in that dwelling, is free. You must leave that dwelling; the man hasn’t done anything wrong.” – Apparently, the NSB-member had given money. “Oh, really?”, I said, “You should have a look at this.” And I gave him the photograph and other material evidence, that he had been nursed in Germany, for example. “Give that to me”, he said, “then I’ll arrange things.” Of course I didn’t trust that. “You are a fine fellow”, I said, “when you succeed in getting us out of that dwelling”.

Catharina: ‘We lived in that NSB-house for another couple of years. I was still very ill – because of the camp. And nobody who helped us. We didn’t get any support, nothing. After all, we didn’t have anything to look for here anymore. We had nobody anymore. And in addition, I couldn’t have children anymore... because of those experiments.’

Maurits: ‘I wanted to sue the married couple that had betrayed us at the time.’
Catharina: ‘Our house was hit by my missiles twice. We fixed everything again.’
Mauritis: ‘I never refer to the fact that I have been in the camp; it should never be an excuse for a bad temper. We always continued to think very positively.’
Catharina: ‘Always. When one of the two of us starts thinking negatively, the other says: “No, no: stay positive, always stay positive”.’
Mauritis: ‘Of course we didn’t have wedding-rings in Westerbork. And our engagement-rings had been taken away from us directly in Auschwitz. After the war we had new rings made.’
Catharina: ‘With our wedding-date inside.’
Mauritis: ‘Shortly after the war Catrien and I have told each other what we had gone through. But in the course of time... it is encapsulated, it won’t come out anymore; neither do I want that.’
Catharina: ‘We try to put it away.’
Mauritis: ‘We have been hardened. We have gone through so much. But I have a soft feeling: when I see something beautiful on TV, I am crying already.’
Catharina: ‘And when someone is beaten on TV, I feel it myself again.’
Mauritis: ‘That remains and stays inside.’
Catharina: ‘It has hit you too deeply.’
Mauritis: ‘I still dream of Auschwitz. I live with it daily. The nightmares never go away anymore. The psychiatrist also can’t help me.’
Catharina: ‘He can’t take it away after all, so it makes no sense.’
Mauritis: ‘And I don’t even tell everything. If I would have to describe everything, people would say: “Take him to the madhouse. It is phantasy, he is inventing it.”’
Catharina: ‘We have had a very narrow escape...’
Mauritis, with astonishment: ‘And we don’t understand that we have survived it.’
Catharina: ‘Purely a coincidence, or sheer luck, that is what it has to do with: that we married in Westerbork, that we were in one of the first train wagons; one-hundred married women from the first wagon, and the rest is gone...’
Mauritis: ‘And that I knew that she was alive.’
Catharina: ‘We saw each other almost every day in Auschwitz.’
Mauritis: ‘That saved us.’

Translated from the Dutch original, and annotated, by Pim Griffioen (April 2014).