

## **Cornelis van't Land**

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### **Man who rescued Jews insists he wasn't a hero.**

Throughout the entire interview, the little man keeps insisting he wasn't a hero.

Why then would a tree be growing in Israel in Cornelis van't Land's honor? And why would Dwight D. Eisenhower have signed a certificate of gratitude to the former Dutch businessman?

Because, despite the 77-year-old caretaker's attempts to downplay it, hundreds of extermination bound Jews, work camp-destined Dutch men and Allied pilots were saved through his efforts.

Van't Land was among those in Holland during the Second World War who concealed, helped feed and protected people like Anne Frank, risking their own safety in the process. To those in hiding, the word hero wouldn't be strong enough for men like van't Land.

"I hope that I don't give you the impression I want to be a big shot," van't Land says. "There were hundreds of people that were so brave."

Almost all of the Dutch population was angry when the Nazi army occupied their country in May, 1940, perhaps mad enough to fight, van't Land recalls. But they didn't and German troops made themselves at home for what would be a five-year stay in Holland.

As a 37-year-old livestock feed businessman in the community of Epe in the Gelderland, van't Land watched with horror as the Germans began extracting food and other supplies from his country, to be shipped back to the motherland.

Jewish property was confiscated, and bright yellow stars began to appear on the coats of the Jews.

The shipments out of Holland soon took on a human form, as night roundups by German police and soldiers collected Jewish families for the eventual trip to German gas chambers, recalls van't Land.

Young Dutch men, usually between 18 and 30 years old, were sent to German war factories to fill in for the many men serving in the Nazi army. Three of van't Land's nephews never returned.

"People just about had a heart attack when there was a knock at the door after 8 p.m.," says van't Land of the Nazi roundups.

Pleas for help came from those looking to hide, and van't Land, guided by Christian morals, wasn't about to turn anyone away. "What would you say"?

If the businessman couldn't hide these "divers," he would refer them to one of his hundreds of customers who could help. People were hidden in basement compartments with false walls. They were given smuggled food rations, and young men were given old farmers' clothes to conceal their identities.

On one occasion, while attempting to get rations to several Jews hiding at a farmhouse, van't Land and a friend were almost caught.

"All of a sudden we heard vehicles coming to the farm and then in no time they (Nazi officials) were knocking at the door and bursting it down." The Jews were hidden in a hay loft with a secret door just in time.

Miraculously, the Germans searched without success and finally left. Van't Land's companion was almost speechless, except to say: "Let's pray. "I'm convinced that for every minute that the love of God protected me", van't Land says.

Today, a tree in Israel grows in tribute to van't Land's efforts.

Van't Land, who had spent several years in North America as a young man and had learned English, also became an obvious candidate for the resistance movement to help Allied forces in Holland.

A U.S. army watch he still proudly clutches is evidence of his many encounters with Allied pilots who came down over Holland.

"I went to a lot of the pilots and asked them what they wanted to do," he says, often hiding them or helping them escape the country.

"This was hazardous and sometimes reckless work."

Van't Land remembers locating Allied soldiers in bushland areas by walking along whistling the Canadian national anthem.

Close calls were also a part of those efforts. Van't Land recalls being involved in an operation with pilots and spies who wanted to capture German soldiers to operate a secret electric generator.

The group scattered after surprisingly bumping into and being detected by German soldiers. Van't Land hid in a hay loft and the barn was surrounded.

It was in that hay loft that van't Land remembered the scheme to escape that early Mennonite leader Menno Simons had used in Holland to avoid being detected. Simons acted like a farmer on a cart and the police didn't recognize him.

Van't Land donned coveralls, wooden shoes and a fork, threw open the barn doors and walked unscathed past gun-ready Nazi soldiers outside.

His assistance to the Allies was recognized after the war when he was presented with a certificate at the American embassy in Holland. It reads: "The president of the United States has directed me to express to Cornelis van't Land the gratitude and appreciation of the American people for gallant service in assisting the escape of Allied soldiers from the enemy." It's signed Dwight D. Eisenhower, General of Army, Commanding General United States Forces European Theatre.

Only 21 other Dutch citizens received such certificates.

For a short time, van't Land fed information on German operations in the area to an English spy hidden in his attic with a secret transmitter.

"He was sending his messages to England and the Germans were walking the streets."

Van't Land's luck eventually ran out after three years of such activity. The Nazi security police got wind of his work and he was forced to go underground in 1943. He remained that way for 2 1/2 years.

Fortunately, the businessman was warned and when the police arrived they found only van't Land's wife, Alice, nursing a child, which apparently influenced them to leave without interrogating her.

Van't Land saw his wife only a few times over the next several years, as he hid in the countryside with a group of undergrounders, moving, about mostly at night.

Van't Land's fascinating story didn't end when Allied forces liberated Holland. Unhappy with tight post-war regulations, he decided he and his family should emigrate to Canada.

Emigration was prevented, however. after repeated medical tests detected a spot on his wife's lung, which had remained with her after a bout of pneumonia as a youngster.

Van't Land was almost prepared to forget his emigration desires. Then he remembered Capt. George Knottenbelt, a London pilot whom he had spoken with after the pilot parachuted into the area during the war.

Van't Land contacted him and Knottenbelt sliced through the red tape. In a week the Lands had received permission to emigrate. They came to Canada in 1950 and eventually became dairy farmers in the area.

Looking back on his experiences in Holland, van't Land says "every war makes beasts of men." "If I talked for a whole day I couldn't give you an idea of what it's like in an occupied country," he says. "You can't imagine what it's like to walk every minute and every day with fear in your heart."

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