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Ben's Story: Holocaust Letters with Selections from the Dutch Underground Press

Kees W. Bolle, editor
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“Man forgets quickly,” says a blurb in the 1941 edition of Het Parool, a Dutch underground newspaper. Our propensity to dismiss the past is in large part why Bolle, a historian of religions and professor emeritus at UCLA, has snipped selections from Dutch underground newspapers and interspersed them with letters written by a childhood friend, Ben Wessels. Ben is dislocated from his village and ultimately sent to Bergen-Belsen, where he perishes at the hands of the Nazis.

In the preface, the editor writes that his goal for the work is to free himself from the “abstraction” of many historical accounts and to show the “ordinariness, the obviousness” of the events that took place during the Holocaust. It is indeed ordinariness and simplicity that power Bolle’s book. Het Parool’s exhortations to support Jewish Dutchmen being rounded up by the Nazis, regardless of the consequences, is a part of quotidian life, but haunting nonetheless. “Soon the day will come when each one will be asked the question: ‘What did you do?’”

Similarly, letters written by the teenaged Ben show ordinary inquiries about the village he was forced to leave—how former teachers are faring and whether his friends have learned the overture to the TannhÃ¤user opera as assigned by the school band leader. Other letters request such mundane items as a “flat battery,” shoelaces, a picture of his old home, his clarinet and sheet music.

Through Wessel’s letters, which later read as though he knows they are being censored (“Fortunately I can tell you that I’m in excellent shape. A food package would please me a great deal, and also some wool for mending,” says one postcard from Bergen-Belsen shortly before he dies), readers follow not only his movements from detainment to concentration camp, but the breaking of his spirit as well. In a letter dated August 1943, after the Nazis arrest his parents, Wessels rescinds the request for his beloved clarinet: “You will understand that under the circumstances I give up on the idea of the clarinet. I would have no wish for something like that anywhere near me, let alone to play it.”

The book closes with the juxtaposition of an underground article about the liberation of concentration camps with a letter from a Dutch organization informing the recipient of Wessels’ letters of his death in Bergen-Belsen just weeks before liberation. Though the work contains far more articles from the underground than letters from Wessel, Ben’s Story puts an ordinary, human face on an extraordinary, and incomprehensible, period in our history.
KIMBERLEE ROTH (July / August 2001)

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