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Translating David Koker's Diary

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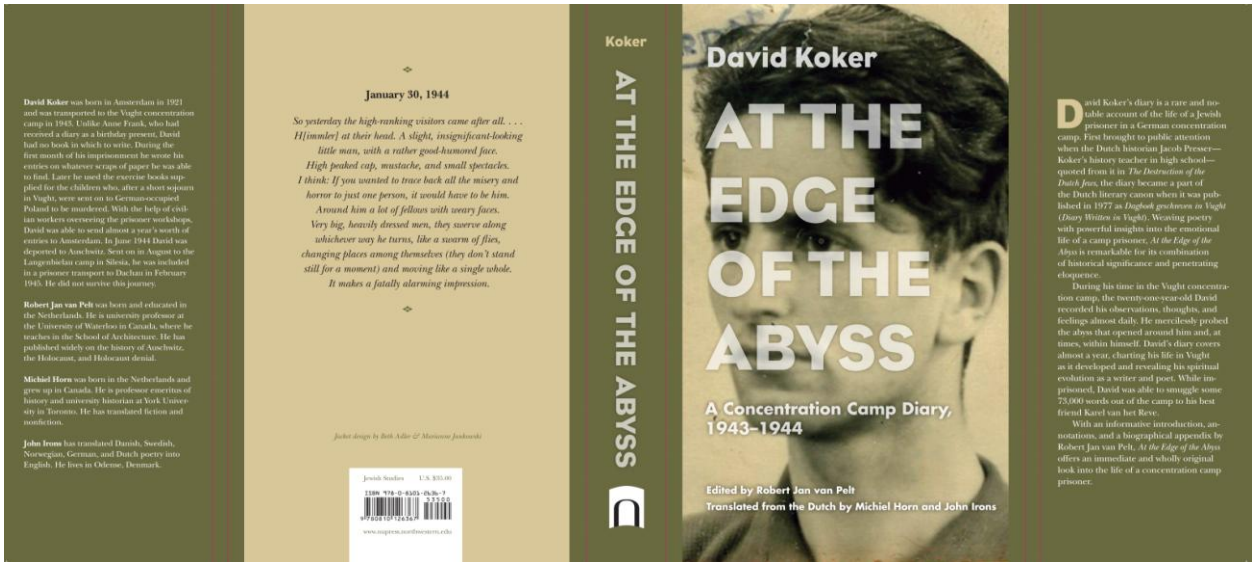

David Koker, *At the Edge of the Abyss: A Concentration Camp Diary, 1943-1944*, ed. Robert Jan van Pelt, trans. Michiel Horn and John Irons ((Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012).

Three years ago, when Robert Jan van Pelt, an architectural and Holocaust historian at the University of Waterloo, asked me whether I would translate the diary of David Koker, I had never heard of David or his diary, or so I told him. I subsequently found out that I was wrong. Both had come within my ken four decades earlier, but I had taken no notice.

In the early 1970s I read the University of Amsterdam historian Jacob (Jacques) Presser's two-volume work *Ondergang* (1965), the history of the persecution and destruction of the Jews of the Netherlands

during the years of German occupation. (Presser's work was translated into English by Arnold Pomerans and appeared in an abridged version as *Ashes in the Wind* in the United Kingdom in 1968, and as *The Destruction of the Dutch Jews* in the United States in 1969.) Presser, who in the late 1930s had taught David at the Vossiusgymnasium, an elite secondary school in Amsterdam, mentions his former pupil and the diary more than once. Later I must have come across David's name in Louis de Jong's multi-volume history of the Netherlands during the war (*Het koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de tweede wereldoorlog*, 1969ff.), which I began to read in 1971. But that was decades ago, and my memory falls far short of retaining everything I read.

When I opened David's diary, therefore, I thought I was faced with the words of a complete stranger. I was fascinated, and it did not take me long to tell Robert Jan that, yes, I was willing to translate the diary, which had appeared in print in the Netherlands in 1977 as *Dagboek geschreven in Vught* (*Diary Written in Vught*). Not the catchiest of titles by a long chalk, but the contents were far more engaging than the title. And I came to realize as the months went on and I got ever farther into the translation that although David was a stranger who died in Central Europe when I was five years old, he was (and is) in some ways close to me.

Consider: Robert Jan knows David's younger brother Max, who survived the war and lives in retirement in Santpoort Zuid, a village just outside Haarlem. My mother's sister Sophia Reitsma, a high school teacher of classics in Amsterdam, and her husband, the University of Amsterdam political theorist Jef Suys, knew Jacques Presser. I'm well acquainted with Henry Schogt, professor emeritus of French at the University of Toronto, and his wife Corrie (she survived the war in hiding), who knew Karel van het Reve, David's best friend, to whom he sent his diary in two installments, and Frits Samson, the architect who devised a means to smuggle illicit letters to David and his family. More speculatively: my father, born in Amsterdam in 1903, earned pocket money as a boy by serving as the shabbes goy for several Jewish neighbours. Is it not possible that one of them knew the Koker family? Finally, in the summer of 2010 I made the closest connection of all when Robert Jan introduced me to Max.

I mention these things because they help to explain why I became deeply involved in the life and diary of David Koker. Although David never had a chance to edit it, the prose reads well, and the poems seem to me to be more than competent. More important, the historical context of the last years of David's life has always fascinated me. Possibly because I have personal memories of the war, I have retained a strong interest in the history of the Netherlands during that time, witness the fact that I have read all of De Jong's monumental history (probably one of a very few people in Canada or even North America to accomplish that; Robert Jan is another). Especially the final year of the war, from D-Day to the liberation of my hometown by English soldiers on 7 May 1945, is deeply engraved in my memory.

My war was not David's war. I was born in Baarn, a town 40 km southeast of Amsterdam, on 3 September 1939, almost three months before David turned eighteen and eight months before Germany invaded the Netherlands. As a result much of the war passed right over me, something made easier by the fact that, not being Jewish, my family did not have to face the deadly threat that David and his family did. Aspects of the war did not go unnoticed, however. From an early stage, an adjacent villa was occupied by officers of the German army units that successively garrisoned our town. I don't remember them as vividly as I do their guard dogs, German Shepherds. Although they were always leashed, they frightened me with their appearance and fierce barking.

Sometimes, at night, I woke up to hear a steady drone overhead. Having learned from our parents that these were "Tommies," Allied airplanes on their way to bomb Germany, I found the sound comforting. Less enjoyable was the sound of gunfire as Allied and German fighter aircraft battled overhead, altercations that began in the summer of 1943, and the Allied strafing of railway trains that passed through our town, located on the main railway line between Amsterdam and points east, within 250 metres of our house. I never quite managed to believe my father's reassurances that they wouldn't hit

our house.

By the time these things were happening, David was in the concentration camp at Vught. By the time our parents shared with my brothers and me the information that the Allies had successfully landed in Normandy – they listened to the BBC throughout the war, though we, their sons, did not know they had an illegal radio – David was in a freight wagon on his way to Auschwitz. He survived that ordeal; he did not survive a transport from Langenbielau camp to Dachau in February 1945. Already ill when the train left Upper Silesia, he died on the way. Even more important than my interest in the war, however, is that in the course of translating his diary I came to identify closely with David. This is not surprising. I approved what I learned about him. He was a bookish lad; so was I. (It must be said that he was better-educated.) He loved classical music; so did I. He was opinionated, perhaps even arrogant; so was I. He was self-critical; so was I. He came and comes across as very thoughtful, someone whom I would have liked.

Furthermore, as his translator I had to try to get into his mind. No one reads texts more carefully than translators do, as they work in two languages (in this case three going on five)[1] to make the source text comprehensible to the target readership. This process is never straightforward, and in the case of David's diary it was often made difficult because, especially when paper was scarce, as in his early weeks in Vught it often was, he wrote with economy. And he often wrote cryptically, since he knew the background or the significance of events, something a reader may have difficulty with, and since he often referred to people by their initials. (Robert Jan was extremely helpful in identifying the people behind the initials.) I often had to think and feel myself as best I could into his situation in order to grasp what he was saying.

David's style and descriptive abilities are superior, so that I was able to envisage what he was describing, and that helped me with the translation. It also led me, curiously perhaps, to start thinking of myself in a way as if I were David, experiencing what he experienced, facing what he faced, thinking what he thought, even as I sat at the keyboard, poring over the text time and again, checking dictionaries and historical websites, especially the Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands, pondering alternative translations of difficult passages.

This illusion of being David became strongest when he described his growing infatuation with Hannelore (Hannie) Hess, a young German-born woman who, like David, worked in the Philips-Kommando, the Vught-based group of forced labourers, mixed Jewish and gentile, who for the better part of a year produced electrical goods for the German armed forces. When I was David's age I, too, kept a diary, and at precisely his age I, too, was infatuated with a young woman, roughly Hannie's age, who, although encouraging me to a degree, as Hannie encouraged David, was less taken with me than I was with her. The emotions that David describes at length, the agonies of analysis and self-analysis he committed to paper, were achingly familiar to me fifty years ago. In due time David got over his infatuation, as did I. The language he and I used in describing our sense of recovery and relief is very similar.

Translating David's diary was, in a sense, an exercise in self-discovery as much as it was an exercise of empathy with someone whose experiences, and the course of whose life, were very different from mine. Good literature has the power both to make us see ourselves more clearly and to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. David Koker's diary does that. His death was a serious loss to Dutch literature. His best friend Karel van het Reve became a major figure in the post-war Dutch intellectual world. There is little doubt in my mind that David's accomplishments would have been at least the equal of Karel's. Indeed, as a writer of both poetry and prose David might well have outshone his friend. At the personal

[1] I had to translate into US English from Dutch and German, with occasional forays into Dutch-Yiddish and French.

level: long before I had finished translating it, I had come to wish that I might have known him in person. I felt, when the diary ended, as though I had lost an old friend. I shall always be grateful to Robert Jan for introducing me to him.