

Foreword

In this book, based partly on genealogical research and partly on rational reconstruction, the author tells the life story of Gerhard Badrian, a member of his mother's family. As told in the opening page, Gerhard was murdered in South Amsterdam in June 1944 by Nazi gunmen who had laid a trap for him.

The book then moves back in time and, like a verbal newsreel of many scenes, provides the frightening story of how this encounter with death finally came about.

Born in Germany as a Jew, Gerhard fled his homeland after Hitler's regime took over. But the apparent safety of the Netherlands evaporated after the German occupation began. Gerhard was forced underground where he used his photographic and other skills to produce convincing identity papers, essential to the survival of those in hiding and on the run. Gerhard's bravado saved many lives, including that of a nephew, Horst Kerpen, snatched from the jaws of death at Westerbork camp, a staging post for the one-way trains to Auschwitz and Sobibor.

Across the pages of this story scurry the heroes and villains of a fearsomely dangerous time. What is the value of such a book? In short, it converts the history of a global war and monstrous crimes against humanity into a personal story of courage, risk and heart-trembling fear. Before such stories are lost or forgotten, it is admirable that the author, whose family were among the few Jewish refugees that Australia accepted at the time, has pieced the story together so that readers can understand the impact of the Holocaust

on those primarily involved. At a moment in history when shared global values are being questioned and challenged, it is admirable that this family story has been rescued from oblivion. It is presented as a gripping story of how extraordinary times converted ordinary people into heroes. And by presenting the story to today's generation, the author has ensured that we do not forget the wrongs and strengthen our defences against repeating them.

– **The Hon. Michael Kirby** AC CMG, past Justice of the High Court of Australia and Co-Chair of the International Bar Association Human Rights Institute.

Prologue

Ordinary people faced with extraordinary situations can sometimes act in extraordinary ways. This book is about such a man, Gerhard Badrian, my mother's cousin. By all accounts, he was a gentle soul, quiet, thoughtful, artistic, compassionate. In a normal world, his passionate love affair with a beautiful young woman would have led to marriage and children, along with a successful career as an outstanding commercial photographer.

But the world of Nazi-occupied Holland was not a normal world. To cope with ruthless tyranny, his first reaction was a perfectly normal one. Keep your head down, don't draw attention to yourself, keep out of harm's way.

Yet as the Nazi screws were tightened, as the regime turned from inhumane to murderous, something inside Gerhard's brain snapped. He went underground, developed a false identity, joined the Resistance.

At first, his involvement was merely praiseworthy. He joined a team of men and women that prepared false identification papers. This saved the lives of hundreds of people. Good job, Gerhard. Well done. Worth an article in a newspaper. Doesn't warrant a book, though.

I first encountered Gerhard Badrian's name when I was young. Just an entry on my family tree, he was one of many of my extended family who died during World War II. In my middle age, a cousin showed me a photograph of a memorial plaque in the Rubensstraat in Amsterdam. The wording of the plaque plainly demonstrated that

Gerhard was an exceptional man. But it was not until my retirement that I had the time and the resources to discover what made him so.

I learnt about his exploits, pretending to be a Gestapo officer (Secret State Police) as he removed Resistance colleagues from custody and spirited them away to safety. In the archives, I found a Gestapo message to Berlin, gloating over the death of this “leading Jewish terrorist”. I learnt about the event held in the Rubensstraat on Memorial Day – annually, 70 years later! – where relatives of colleagues still gathered to remember him. I listened to a recording of a radio broadcast made 30 years after his death, in which his lover remembered him as the love of her life.

In Amsterdam, I met the son of a policeman who was a close colleague of Gerhard’s in the Resistance. The son told me that his father, since deceased, had kept a photo of Gerhard on his desk for the rest of his life. In Germany, I met the son of Gerhard’s nephew whom Gerhard had saved from the Westerbork transit camp. The son had previously been unaware of Gerhard’s involvement, as the nephew had hardly ever spoken about his wartime experiences. And back home in Australia, when I told friends about some of Gerhard’s exploits, a common response was that Steven Spielberg could make a film about him.

Such a man deserves more than a newspaper article, more than a Wikipedia entry (yes, there is one). He deserves a book. Gerhard is not simply an unsung hero, he is the unsung hero of my family. This is my personal tribute to his memory.

Paul Gardner
November 2019

34

Gerrit van der Veen

Amsterdam 1941

Had anyone told Gerrit van der Veen in his youth that he would one day head a Resistance group fighting against a murderous dictatorship, he would no doubt have laughed.

He was a skilful artist and sculptor who had developed his talents as a young adult. Now in his late thirties, he had completed a commission to make a large sculpture, intended for public display, just prior to the invasion. A socially minded man, he was active in a society that brought artists together to promote their common interests and support cultural development in the wider community.

Soon after the occupation, the Nazis required all cultural activities to conform to their directives. The occupiers founded the *Nederlandsche Kultuurkamer* to give effect to this policy. Artists were ordered to join this Chamber of Culture, sign the *Ariërverklaring* declaring their Aryan ancestry and agree to obey the Chamber's directives.

Gerrit refused. Instead, he and a small group of like-minded colleagues formed an underground organisation, *De Vrije Kunstenaar* (The Free Artist). They published a newsletter calling for resistance against the occupation. The group's members understood perfectly well that this could prove dangerous, and that they would need to take steps to avoid being arrested.

Gerrit was a leader, a motivator, a creative thinker. He gathered

like-minded people together and encouraged them to work cooperatively. He knew that if people were to go underground and resist Nazi oppression, they would need false identities, hiding places, possibly even escape routes out of the country. Forged ID cards were going to be needed. Forming the PBC was the first practical outcome of his intention to resist. From just a loose collection of people in 1941, by 1942 it had developed into a well-organised operation.

Gerhard's friend Frans Meijer was a key member. In the early days of the Resistance, Frans lived at Herengracht 554. Some of his associates who knew his address were captured by the Gestapo, so he decided it would be safer if he were to move. He rented an office at Amsteldijk 37 and his home also became the headquarters of the PBC.



Even its early days, in 1941, Gerrit van der Veen was aware that the potential scope of the PBC's operations was unlimited. More personnel would be needed to run an effective operation. He had primed his small team to be on the lookout for capable people who could be encouraged to join the group. Frans Meijer was therefore following his leader's instructions when he suggested to Gerhard that he could be useful to the PBC.

Gerrit himself possessed a formidable armoury of leadership skills: intelligence, creativity, humane values, an organised mind and emotional commitment to the task at hand. He also possessed that essential attribute of good leaders: the ability to enthuse others to work together for a common cause. His previous years of work as a sculptor had also taught him the importance of meticulous planning if a complex task was to be completed successfully. He drew upon this capacity in his entirely unexpected new role as the leader of a Resistance group. Opposing the Nazi regime was a deadly, dangerous exercise and it was therefore crucial to ensure that every member of his team was completely trustworthy, reliable and careful. The PBC needed more workers, but only those with the right attributes. His job as leader required him to be selective.

Frans Meijer arranged to meet Gerhard in the Café Eijlders in central Amsterdam, whose proprietor was sympathetic to the Resistance. It was situated in a laneway close to one of the city's main intersections. A quiet back room was available for meetings that were best kept out of the public eye. Gerrit was already waiting there. Frans introduced his friend and then left the two men together while he returned to his own work.

Even though Gerrit trusted Frans' judgement, Gerrit went through his usual routine. He asked some innocuous questions about Gerhard's personal history, and Gerhard responded with a succinct summary of his German-Jewish background, his two years as a child with Dutch foster-parents, his interest in photography and his decision (and that of his entire family) to flee Nazi oppression before the war.

"Frans told me that you were in hiding out in the country, but now you're back in Amsterdam," Gerrit asserted. "Why didn't you stay there? Surely it's safer for you there than here in Amsterdam?"

"I was there for almost two weeks, and the boredom was driving me mad. But more importantly, I felt guilty. I know I'm just one person and I'm not going to be able to save the world, but we have to oppose these Nazi bastards and I want to help."

(Good response, thought Gerrit, no delusions of grandeur, no superhero complex, just someone willing to contribute.)

"Frans told me you're a photographer. Tell me about your work in that area."

"I worked in Berlin for a few years in fashion photography, did an advanced course at a college there, and acquired a collection of various cameras and equipment. I can develop and print my own pictures and make enlargements. I met Marius Meijboom already in Berlin, and soon after I arrived in the Netherlands he gave me a job."

(Impressive, Gerrit noted. He knew Marius Meijboom personally, and of course was aware of his reputation as a foremost commercial photographer. He wouldn't have offered this guy a job unless he was top-grade.)

“That’s excellent, we need a good photographer here. One of our main activities is making forged ID cards. What’s your experience in that department?” (*Gerrit already knew that Gerhard had no experience at all; he was more interested in the style of his response to this probing question than the content.*)

“Forging documents? I have never done that. But I expect you have others in your group who can show me what to do. I’m willing to learn. I’ve been taking pictures ever since I was a teenager, and along the way, I’ve always tried to improve my technique and learn to do new things.”

(Perfect, thought Gerrit. Modest, no attempt at pretension, self-aggrandisement. I think we have a real team player here.)

He concluded the interview with some small talk, told Gerhard that he would be warmly welcomed as a member of the PBC and arranged for him to visit the PBC’s secret headquarters to meet some of the others in the group.



Through such recruits, the PBC over the course of a year became a larger and more efficient group. In turn, the PBC became linked to a much larger operation that became known as the *Verzet* (Resistance). The *Verzet* was not a single, coordinated organisation – there were sound reasons for keeping its many cells separate – but it managed to attract support from tens of thousands of people. The *Verzet* attracted people with various skills and interests. Some, like those in the PBC, made forged documents. Others arranged hiding places for people in danger. Numerous landlords provided accommodation to people in hiding. A few armed men engaged in guerrilla warfare. One group smuggled people out of the country. CS-6 was a largely Communist group that carried out sabotage and assassinated Gestapo officers and Dutch collaborators. And later in the war, a small group of leaders – Gerrit was one of them – was in contact with Allied headquarters in London to help coordinate military actions.

35

Gerhard in the PBC

Amsterdam 1941–42

At first, Gerhard was hesitant about joining the PBC full-time. He was still finding occasional work as a freelancer, and offered to participate part-time. Later, as Nazi abuses of human rights grew and the demands on the PBC increased, he eventually devoted all his time to the Resistance. Fortunately, there were some wealthy anti-Nazi business leaders who were willing to finance the work. There was even a rumour – no one knew if it was actually true – that some *Verzet* people employed in the Nazi-controlled bank were embezzling large sums and diverting them to the Resistance.

Gerhard initially worked with a small group of people, contributing his talents as a photographer to the team and learning about their specific skills. His major task was to help create false ID cards for people who needed them: at first, other members of the Resistance and political opponents of the regime and later Jews who wanted to go into hiding.

Photographing someone who needed the forged ID was obviously essential but numerous other capabilities were required as well. Gerrit van der Veen's skill in attracting support from diverse people with specific competencies and connections was crucial.

Citizens would be found who would hand over their genuine ID cards to the PBC, and then report to a police station that they had lost their card. A particular policeman at one station was sympathetic to

the Resistance and would authorise the issue of a replacement. The “lost” card would then be altered by the PBC team.

The photograph pasted to the ID had to be removed without damaging the card itself. Henk van der Tweel was a brilliant physics student with a penchant for technological design, who built equipment used in this process. Peter Roelofs was a science graduate in chemistry who devised a method for slowly dissolving the glue without damaging the card. The card was mounted in Henk’s apparatus. A different chemical technique was used to remove the red ink-stamped J on an ID card. Another alteration involved replacing the fingerprint of the original owner with that of the new owner. Other details were left unchanged: the new owner would adopt the name of the previous one.

Prior to the war, Frits Boverhuis was the supervisor in a printing firm. He threw himself into supporting the work of the PBC. The group also had access to another printer, Frans Duwaer, who specialised in producing high quality forged documents.

Otto Treumann was a highly skilled commercial artist who made precise copies of Nazi logos. Frans Duwaer then used these to manufacture plates for printing counterfeit Gestapo letterheads. Otto’s artistic skills also extended to forging signatures. His remarkable hand-eye coordination allowed to him to look at the signature of a top Nazi official and with a rapid flourish of the pen make an excellent copy of it.

The PBC also compiled a vast collection of Gestapo rubber stamps. One was needed for over stamping the corners of freshly mounted photographs on the altered ID. Some rubber stamps were forged copies. Some effort was saved later when a *Verzet* sympathiser was found who worked in the factory that made the genuine versions. He would make an extra copy and pass it on to the PBC.

Over time, the PBC grew in productivity, partly through attracting more personnel, and partly through obtaining better access to essential raw materials. One man devised a method of making the fake watermark paper needed to make counterfeit IDs, by gluing

two sheets of paper together. Another was able to secure a batch of the genuine paper from the Van Gelder and Sons company, a leading Dutch papermaker. (“Secure” is a polite expression for sneaking it out of the factory while no one was looking.)

Much later, Gerhard’s photographic skills would be employed in another *Verzet* activity. He joined the Hidden Camera group of photographers – Marius Meijboom was a prominent member – who surreptitiously captured images of Nazi officers and Dutch collaborators. The CS-6 group would make use of the photos in hunting these people in order to assassinate them.



Gerhard Badrian at work in the PBC office in the Amsteldijk.

The photographic group had another mission as well: to create a comprehensive collection of images to record Nazi actions during the war. Great care had to be taken, of course, not to be observed taking these pictures. Miniature cameras were used, often hidden behind clothing or mounted inside a briefcase. Gerhard cooperated with the group by being one of the people who developed the film and printed the images. He had access to the darkroom in Marius Meijboom's studio.

Gerhard wasn't involved in sabotage and assassination. He met one of CS-6's operatives one evening, a young woman, who told him that killing people wasn't her preferred occupation either. But she added, "We don't really have much choice. We have to stop the Nazis and their collaborators somehow, and we can hardly arrest them and put them in jail." Gerhard saw her point and didn't raise any objections. The only shooting he did was with his camera, he told her.

Members of the PBC cheered one evening after the news reached them that a cinema holding a film evening for the entertainment of the Gestapo had been bombed. Maybe the bombing had been carried out by CS-6, maybe not. They didn't know, they weren't told, and they didn't ask. But they cheered.



A man who is in hiding, an *illegaal*, living in the midst of a brutal fascist regime motivated simultaneously by aggressive imperialism and murderous antisemitism, is hardly likely to describe himself as happy. And yet, once he joined the PBC and became deeply involved in its work, Gerhard felt happier than he had been for a long time.

If not joy, then at least he felt satisfaction in being able to participate in a project that potentially saved lives. The feelings of boredom and uselessness that he had expressed to Cokkie in Groningen quickly dissipated. He gained pleasure from being able to work with others who shared his humane values and demonstrated the same commitment to producing high quality work that he valued in his former work as a commercial photographer. And there was camaraderie,

the enjoyment of being with men and women who could do serious work and still find a little time for sharing a joke, a story, a friendly smile. His friend Frans smoothed the path by introducing him to the others, and whenever a new face appeared at a PBC meeting, Gerritt van der Veen always ensured that the newcomer was introduced personally to Gerhard.

It did not take Gerhard long to discover the range of skills that made Gerritt so effective in his role as head of the PBC. He was more than just a generator of creative ideas, more than just a skilled organiser who could delegate tasks to the right people. He was a true leader in the fullest sense of the word, a man who brought people together, enthused them, valued them, helped them to continually learn and improve.

Gerhard was soon invited to participate in small group meetings that were tasked with solving particular problems. “We are running short of genuine ID cards that we can alter. Does anyone have some thoughts about how we can get some more?” he might ask. He would praise creative contributions to the discussion. Gerhard never heard him ridicule unusual responses. No one ever left a meeting feeling diminished.

If a complex project required detailed logistical planning, Gerritt avoided adopting the persona of a dictatorial managing director ordering underlings to carry out specific tasks. He would instead turn to the group and invite them to contribute ideas. “How do you think we should organise this? Who do you think would be the best person to do that job? Do you think we might need some advice about how to handle this?” And he would allow some time for reflection, not expecting instant solutions.

Gerhard had a few years of experience at working with competent people, at the commercial photography business in Berlin and later at Marius Meijboom’s studio in Amsterdam, but he had never encountered anyone whose range of competencies was as broad as Gerritt’s. The involvement in the PBC triggered some unusual thoughts in Gerhard’s mind, which he naturally kept to himself. “I’m

doing volunteer work that won't earn me any money. There'll be no public acclaim for becoming a successful forger of ID cards. There'll be great danger if I'm found out. And yet I'm happy."