

CHAPTER 12

By Trial and Error: The Experience of a Dutch Escape Line in the Second World War

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During the Second World War, Dutch citizens watched the vast number of Allied bombers en route from England to their targets in Nazi Germany.¹ But those planes had to pass through a gauntlet of fire from German anti-aircraft guns and fighter planes even before they reached Germany and again on their return. On one night alone, 21 June 1943, forty-four Royal Air Force (RAF) planes were shot down over the Netherlands.² The US 8th Air Force from June 1942 to the end of the war experienced sixty thousand airmen shot down over western Europe, with twenty-six thousand killed, thirty thousand taken prisoner, and four thousand who evaded capture.³

¹ I am indebted to the many people in the Netherlands and the United States who, over the course of a decade or more, translated for me source documents from Dutch, French, and German and to the archivists in both countries who directed me to those records. I particularly wish to acknowledge the help of Janine Marseille-Smit, sister of Karst Smit, for sharing with me so much about her brother, including family photographs.

² Bob De Graaff, *Stepping Stones to Freedom: Help to Allied Airmen in the Netherlands During World War II* (Marceline, MO: Walsworth Publishing, 2003), 27.

³ Ralph K. Patton, "La Nébuleuse de la Résistance Franco-Américain Colloque, Paris, Dec. 4, 2000": United States Air Forces Escape & Evasion Society *COMMUNICATIONS*, 8 Dec. 2000, 27.

As a consequence, escape lines were organized to move the evaders from the Netherlands and Belgium, through France, and over the Pyrenees to Spain, where they would be transferred by the British Embassy in Madrid to the British naval base at Gibraltar and flown back to England.⁴ But the danger to those Dutch who helped Allied airmen was tremendous. In August 1940 the general commanding the *Luftwaffe* in the Netherlands announced that aiding Allied airmen was punishable by death. During the war from 150 to 165 Dutch helpers of airmen were executed.⁵ Add to those figures the many helpers who were sent to concentration camps.

Escape lines in the Netherlands aided not only Allied airmen but also escaped prisoners of war, *onderduikers* (political opponents of the Nazis and men in hiding from the German labor draft, literally “under divers”), *Engelandvaarders* (young men seeking to reach England to join the RAF or the Dutch Princess Irene Brigade), and Jewish Dutch citizens. The focus of this paper is on one such line, the Smit-Van der Heijden Line, named after its principal figures, Karst Smit, a *marechaussee* (Dutch Royal Military Police), and Eugene van der Heijden, a teacher.

Karst Smit

Born 10 June 1917 in The Hague, Karst Smit was the oldest son in a multi-generational family of blacksmiths. The shop that carried stoves and other merchandise faced the street, with the living quarters above it and the grandparents on the third floor. They were a devout Dutch Reformed family, working hard six days a week and going to the Nieuwe Zuiderkerk twice on Sunday. Karst, his father, brother, and three sisters all sang in the choir.⁶ Family photos suggest it was a family with a close-knit, supportive relationship.

Following secondary school, where Karst studied French, German, and English, he worked in a tax office during the day and took business school classes at night.⁷ His obligatory military service began in March 1937, with Karst being promoted to sergeant in ten months. Enjoying his military service, Karst in March 1938 signed up for another six years

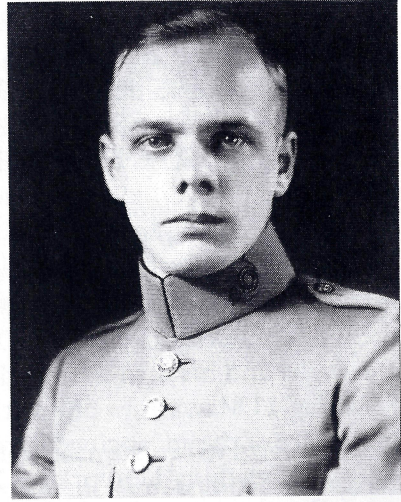
⁴ Sherri Greene Ottis, *Silent Heroes, Downed Airmen and the French Underground* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 174-75, and frontispiece, “Major Escape Routes through France, 1940-1945.” Tom Applewhite, 2nd Lt. USAAF, discussions with the author, 2000-2006.

⁵ De Graaf, *Stepping Stones*, 38, 42.

⁶ Janine Marseille-Smit, letter to the author, 3 June 2005.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 May 2006.

Fig. 12.1. Karst Smit in *Jagers* uniform
(courtesy Janine Marseille-Smit)



and was assigned to the *Jagers* regiment, second battalion.⁸ Within a week, Karst's battalion was transferred to Tilburg.⁹

Karst's assignment to Tilburg was fortunate because the city would play an important role in the escape lines. In 1939 Tilburg had a population of ninety-seven thousand and was the center of the Netherlands woolen industry. It was also the center of transportation in the province of Brabant, with the greater part of railway traffic in the southern Netherlands passing through it. Moreover, it is located on the Wilhelmina Canal, which connects Eindhoven and Tilburg to the river Maas, and sits astride the roads to 's Hertogenbosch (Den Bosch), Breda, Eindhoven, and Turnhout (in Belgium).¹⁰ A significant proportion of Allied airmen seeking to get back to England and Dutch people fleeing the Nazis would have to go through Tilburg on their way to Belgium, France, and Spain.

During Karst's first two years in Tilburg, he made key contacts, such as Bertram Brasz, whose home later would become a stopping point for escaped French prisoners of war and Allied airmen.¹¹ The

⁸ "Extract from the Service Records of the Royal Ground Forces, Royal Air Force, Royal Navy and the Royal Military Police Concerning: Smit, Karst Gerrit," Ministry of Defence, The Hague.

⁹ "De *Jagers* Rukken Tilburg Binnen," *Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant*, 29 Mar. 1938.

¹⁰ Naval Intelligence, *Netherlands* (London: Naval Intelligence Division, British Admiralty, Oct. 1944), 231, 696; Tony Bosch, Penn Valley, CA, letter to the author, 9 Sept. 2006.

¹¹ *Vragenlijst* of Bertram Brasz, 22 Aug. 1945, Military Intelligence Service (MIS), Headquarters European Theatre of Operations United States Army (HQ ETOUSA), National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), National Archives II (NAII), College Park, MD, UD183: MIS-X Files, Holland, 1945-47.

training marches and field exercises Karst and his men conducted, fanning out from Tilburg and going as far as Baarle-Nassau on the Belgian border, familiarized him with the countryside, something that would be invaluable when it came time to move fugitives from the Nazis out of the country as quickly as possible.¹²

The German invasion

As a German invasion of the Netherlands on 10 May 1940 became imminent, Karst was assigned responsibility for three drawbridges over the Wilhelmina Canal between Oirschot and Tilburg. At any sign of the enemy, he and his men were to destroy the bridges. On the morning of Saturday, 11 May, armed only with 1890-vintage carbines and one pistol, in the face of the advancing German army, they blew up the bridges and retreated, reaching Dunkirk on 20 May. There, with fourteen hundred other Dutch troops, they boarded the French merchant ship, SS *Pavon*, intending to sail to England via Cherbourg. But the ship was bombed and strafed by German planes, with many of the Dutch soldiers killed and wounded. On fire and leaking, the ship had to be abandoned. Unable to join the evacuation of British troops at Dunkirk because of lack of space on the British ships, Karst and his men returned to the Netherlands.¹³

Nazi oppression

During the German occupation, conditions in Belgium were “relatively benign” by comparison to those in the Netherlands.¹⁴ The former was administered by the German military, while the latter had a civilian Nazi government, headed by two Austrian Nazis, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, High Commissioner or *Reichskommissar* in charge of the civil administration, and Hanns Albin Rauter, “Higher SS and Police Leader,” who received his orders directly from Heinrich Himmler.¹⁵ Oppressive Nazi control of the civilian population included mandatory possession of identity cards with regular identity checks “on street corners and stations, on trains and in theatres.”¹⁶

¹² Tony Bosch, interview by the author, 30 Aug. 2006.

¹³ Karst Smit, “De Ramp met de Pavon,” *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 90 (Oct. 1996): 16-17.

¹⁴ Karst Smit, interview by the author, 6-7 July 2002.

¹⁵ Werner Warmbrunn, *The Dutch under German Occupation, 1940-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 27, 30.

¹⁶ Bob Moore, *Victims & Survivors, The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands 1940-1945* (London: Arnold, 1997), 159.

The systematic isolation and exclusion of Jews from the rest of Dutch society was followed by mass deportations. Dutch men were drafted to work in Germany, but when that did not produce enough workers, the Germans used mass raids to round up additional young men. University students were required to sign a declaration of loyalty to the Third Reich or face the labor draft. Radios were seized to prevent listening to broadcasts from London. Strikes, gatherings, and distribution and possession of pamphlets were made subject to the death penalty. An ever-expanding curfew was imposed. And there were reprisal executions of hostages.¹⁷

Marechaussee service

Determined to oppose the German occupation, in August 1940, Karst joined the *marechaussees*. This gave him the significant advantage of being able to wear a uniform, carry a weapon, be out on the streets after curfew, and because the *marechaussees* were responsible for patrolling the borders, he was free to cross the border into Belgium.¹⁸

Marechaussees wore distinctive uniforms (see fig. 12.5.) making them readily identifiable to non-Dutch fugitives, such as Allied airmen and escaping POWs in places such as crowded railway stations. They were predominantly from the western Netherlands, the more Protestant part of the country.¹⁹

Following postings in different parts of the Netherlands, in January 1942 Karst was assigned to Hilvarenbeek, a small farming town south of Tilburg and near the Belgian border. For anyone seeking to go to Brussels, Hilvarenbeek provided access to the Belgian cities of Turnhout and Antwerp. It was an ideal location for Karst to be able to help people fleeing the Nazis, not only because of his authority to patrol the border and cross into Belgium but also because of the smuggling activity common to that area. Shortages in one country and abundance in the other, plus taxes imposed on a product in one country but not in the other, created a vigorous flow of goods carried by smugglers across the border, mainly farm produce from the Netherlands to Belgium and

¹⁷ Moore, *Victims* 79; Warmbrunn, *German Occupation*, 167, 72-73, 151-52, 57-58; Kees Van Kemenade, *Hilvarenbeek, 1940-1945* (Hapert: Drukkerij-Uitgeverij De Kempen, 1983), 79; Walter B. Maass, *The Netherlands at War: 1940-1945* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1970), 143-44.

¹⁸ Karst Smit, RTL5 Television interview, date unknown; De Graaf, *Stepping Stones*, 123.

¹⁹ Eugene van der Heijden, "1942; De eerste 'reiziger,'" *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 85 (June 1995): 30.

manufactured products plus tobacco and chocolate from Belgium to the Netherlands.²⁰

By not using the official crossing points, these enterprising individuals avoided the customs and tax officials. A large forested area on the Dutch side of the border, known as Landgoed de Utrecht (estate de Utrecht) near the town of Esbeek, provided cover for smugglers waiting for the border patrols to pass by. Not only *marechaussees* patrolled the border but also the *Deutsche Grenzschutz*, the German Border Police.²¹ The *marechaussees* were responsible for preventing smuggling but privately could look the other way. Professional smugglers were more likely to be arrested by them than ordinary people, who were trying to help their families survive wartime shortages and loss of income by doing a little smuggling on the side. The *Deutsche Grenzschutz* men, however, were diligent in carrying out their duties to prevent smuggling and capture fugitives, not wanting to be sent to the Russian front.²²

Threats to the escape line

The Gestapo is probably what most people would think of as the greatest danger to an escape line or any other form of resistance during the Second World War. But there were multiple German secret police agencies. In the Netherlands there were two agencies that people feared, the SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*), the Security Service of the SS, and the Order Police (*Ordnungspolizei*), known as the Green Police for the color of their uniforms. The latter “carried out arrests, mass raids, deportations, actions against strikes, and executions.”²³ By contrast, in Belgium, because of the German military administration, the escape lines’ main danger was the *Geheime Feldpolizei* (GFP – Secret Field Police), part of the *Abwehr*, German military intelligence. In Antwerp the *Abwehr* set up a false escape line known as the “KLM Line,” that swept up 177 unsuspecting airmen for interrogation and eventual imprisonment.²⁴ And always there was the risk of betrayal by collaborators. They

²⁰ Kees van Kemenade, conversation with the author, 5 May 2010; Joke Schilders, letter to the author, 28 Jan. 2013. Eugene van der Heijden, “Grensperikelen,” *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 90 (Oct. 1996): 21-24; Maria van de Pol and Stan van de Pol, letter to the author, 19 Jan. 2011; Gusta and Madeleine Claes, interview by Hans Otten, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 30 Aug. 2010; Karst Smit, “Nachtjas,” *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 72 (March 1992): 27-29.

²¹ Ellen Van Gilst, “In Dienst van de ‘Comet Line,’” *De Telegraaf*, 9 May 1992.

²² Karst Smit, “Tramavontuur,” *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 83 (Dec. 1994): 28-30.

²³ Warmbrunn, *German Occupation*, 40-41.

²⁴ W. J. M. Willemsen, “Escape-avontuur eindigde in Antwerpen,” *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 53 (June 1987): 30.

could be the greatest danger of all because they might be neighbors, acquaintances, people you would have no reason to suspect, and not necessarily members of the Dutch Nazi Party strutting around in their uniforms.

The first fugitives – the Frenchmen

Following the French surrender, 1.6 million French soldiers were transported east across the Rhine. They were “dispersed in work gangs: on farms, in workshops, on construction sites, in factories, in mines in Germany. More than a million were still there at the beginning of 1942.”²⁵ Not surprisingly, many of them wanted to go home, and the work gangs presented more opportunities to escape than POW camps.²⁶

In April 1942, three months after his transfer to Hilvarenbeek, Karst and another *marechaussee* were patrolling Landgoed de Utrecht near the Belgian border, when they encountered two men hiding in a ditch who at first appeared to be smugglers but, on being questioned, proved to be escaped French prisoners of war attempting to walk home. On that occasion the most the two *marechaussees* could do to help them was to take them across the border into Belgium and point them in the direction of Weelde (see fig. 6), the nearest Belgian town where they could get transportation to Brussels. Realizing there would be more such men, Karst discussed with his friend Bertram Brasz of Tilburg what could be done to provide more effective help. Brasz directed Karst to his cousin, Cornelis Brasz of Enschede, a town close to the German border, who agreed to help. It was decided that Cornelis and friends of his in the resistance would patrol the border and pick up any escaped Frenchmen they found crossing into the Netherlands. They would supply them with clothing as needed and accompany them by train to Tilburg where Karst or others in his group would take over, providing them with Belgian money and false Belgian identity cards, and guide them across the border into Belgium. From Weelde the Frenchmen could make their own way to a contact address in Brussels provided to them by Karst.²⁷

²⁵ Peschanski, Denis, et al., *Collaboration and Resistance Images of Life in Vichy France 1940-1944* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 94.

²⁶ Waldschmidt, Dominique and Odile (eds.), *Le nez au vent, Récit d'évasion*, memoirs of Charles Waldschmidt, French prisoner of war, written in 1956 and edited and reproduced in 2009 for circulation within the Waldschmidt family.

²⁷ Karst Smit, letter to Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (RIOD), 8 Sep. 1963. Karst Smit, testimony of 5 Aug. 1954, agency unidentified, papers of Ellen van Gilst. Karst Smit, report to the French Embassy in The Hague, 13, Aug. 1952, from file of Karst Smit, Dutch Ministry of Defence; Karst Smit, “Report of activities of Karst

Next came Jewish Dutch citizens

With mass deportations of Jewish Dutch citizens under way by July 1942,²⁸ more and more desperate people were seeking a way out of the Netherlands. In early May, Karst received a phone call from his friend Bertram Brasz asking him to come by. During their meeting, Brasz explained that his cousin Cornelis of Enschede had asked if they would help in the escape of Andries Hoek, the son of a Jewish dress shop proprietor in Enschede. Hoek had a contact in Brussels, Marie Krauss, who would provide temporary housing, and Hoek gave her address to Karst. On 10 May 1942, Karst guided Hoek across the border. A few days later, with one of his top aides, *marechaussee* David Jonkers, Karst paid Krauss and her brother, Jean, a visit at their home. They discussed arrangements for future refugees. Karst would see to it that the fugitives were provided with travel money and false Belgian identity cards. The more independent ones would be guided across the Dutch-Belgian border and given the Krauss address (never in writing) in Brussels, leaving it to them to get there on their own. But whenever possible, Karst would take them to Brussels himself. Jean Krauss had contacts with sympathetic Belgian police who would pass the people on to cooperative French police at the French border.²⁹

The aid given to one Jewish family, the Keesing family, was particularly poignant. The father had already reached Brussels. His wife and their three children, a little boy and two girls, aged from five to nine, had been hiding in an attic in Amsterdam and were to follow him as soon as possible. The opportunity came on Christmas Eve, 1942. It had been snowing all day, and by nightfall the fields and roads were hidden under a heavy layer of snow making it difficult to walk through it and impossible to manage on bicycles. It was so cold that the German border guards remained in their huts near their fires, reasoning that no one would try to cross the border in such weather. Four members of the escape line, three *marechaussees* and one civilian, guided the little family through the forest for three hours. The children were suffering from the bitter cold, so the *marechaussees* would alternate holding them under their great coats to warm them and muffle their crying. Once across the border, one of the *marechaussees* accompanied the family to Brussels,

Smit," helper file of Karst Smit, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), National Archives II (NAII), College Park, MD, UD183: MIS-X Files, Holland, 1945-47; Karst Smit, letter to National Union of War Escapees, 27 Sep. 1973, from the papers of Ed Ragas, Baarle-Nassau.

²⁸ Warmbrunn, *German Occupation*, 167.

²⁹ Karst Smit, letter to RIOD.



Fig. 12.2. Assisting the Keesing family
(courtesy of Ewan McClure)

while the others returned to Hilvarenbeek. It was midnight when they returned, just as the villagers were on their way to midnight mass. Some villagers were expressing disappointment about how Christmas had been spoiled—they missed the chiming of their beloved church bells, the Germans having confiscated them for metal to make armaments. But for the handful of men who had helped the Keesings, it was the most beautiful Christmas of their lives.³⁰

Some people in the Netherlands exploited the desperate people fleeing the Nazis, particularly when it came to providing a false Belgian identity card with a fugitive's correct photo. But such cards were provided at no cost by Karst Smit's organization. One Jewish man writing after the war about the aid given to him in safely reaching Brussels, praised the members of the escape line for their patriotic and humanitarian work.³¹

Pillarization of Dutch society

Dutch society before the war was characterized by “four vertical *zuilen* or pillars, comprising three clearly identifiable groups, Roman Catholic, Protestant and social democratic, together with a fourth,

³⁰ Eugene van der Heijden, “De Witte Kerstnacht,” *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 71 (Dec. 1991): 17-20.

³¹ Lenck, John M. S. (pseudonym for C. Citroen), *Vlucht over Vier Grenzen* (Amsterdam: G. W. Breughel, n.d.), 21.

more nebulous neutral or liberal group.”³² Each pillar had its own newspapers, political parties, trade unions, and cultural organizations.³³ This pillarization undercut potential cooperation in the resistance movement among the members of the different pillars. A study of the resistance in the region of Twente found that “Protestants, Catholics, Socialists, and Communists mostly operated independently, not so much because of unwillingness to cooperate, but because they did not know each other.”³⁴

In 1930 Roman Catholics in the Netherlands represented 36.4 percent of the population, with the greatest concentration in the two southern provinces of North Brabant (88.6 percent) and Limburg (93.5 percent).³⁵ The Smit-Van der Heijden Line was centered in the province of North Brabant, particularly in the towns of Hilvarenbeek, Esbeek, Goirle, and Baarle-Nassau. Karst Smit was Protestant, as most likely were many of the *marechaussees* who assisted him.

Escape lines in the Netherlands have been described as “webs” or “networks” of resistance contacts, rather than organizations in the usual sense.³⁶ The Smit-Van der Heijden Line was probably unusual in that it combined a military structure (the armed, uniformed *marechaussees*) with civilian contacts scattered across several provinces. Moreover, Karst Smit, by virtue of being a *marechaussee*, was in a position of authority in Hilvarenbeek in which he came into contact with all types of people. Of these, first and foremost, were the members of the van der Heijden family, a staunchly Catholic family.

The van der Heijden family

Border crossings with fugitives from the Nazis had to be timed to avoid confrontations with the German border guards. Even though Karst and his men were prepared to shoot the German guards to protect the people they were aiding, this had to be avoided because of the consequences.³⁷ What they needed was a safe location near the border where the fugitives could rest, be fed, and have their false Belgian ID

³² Moore, *Victims*, 10.

³³ Ivo Schöffer, “The Jews in the Netherlands: The Position of a Minority through Three Centuries,” *Studia Rosenthaliana* 15, no. 1 (Mar. 1981): 86-87.

³⁴ Hilbrink, Coen, *De illegalen, Illegaliteit in Twente & het aangrenzende Salland 1940-1945* (The Hague: SDU Uitgeverij, 1989), 391.

³⁵ Naval Intelligence, *Netherlands*, 96.

³⁶ J. E. Van Loon-Boon, interview by Marlies van Rijn, 1 Sept. 1982, Bibliothecaris Regionaal Archief Leiden, 9; Hilbrink, *De illegalen*, 391.

³⁷ Lenck, *Vlucht*, 24.



Fig. 12.3. Van der Heijden family
(courtesy van der Heijden family)

prepared while waiting for a good opportunity to cross into Belgium. The Van der Heijden family home was ideally situated. It was a short walk from the *marechaussee* headquarters in Hilvarenbeek but at the same time located on the edge of town where there were only open fields and scattered farmhouses. Strangers could be slipped into the house through the huge garden in the rear. The family's ties to Belgium were an additional help. The mother, Elisabeth Peeters-van der Heijden, was born in Meerle, Belgium, just across the border and still had relatives there, and the father, Josephus van der Heijden, had lived in Belgium during WWI.³⁸ It was logical for the Van der Heijdens to cross into Belgium for family visits.³⁹ In addition, they were as familiar with the Flemish variation of Dutch spoken in Belgium as with the standard Dutch spoken in the Netherlands.⁴⁰

In April 1942, Karst approached Eugene van der Heijden, the second oldest son in the family, about whether the Van der Heijdens would be willing to house briefly an escaped French POW. They immediately agreed to help.⁴¹ That man was only the first of a steady stream of refugees over the next eighteen months who stayed there.

³⁸ Eugene van der Heijden, "De Studenten," *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 91 (Dec. 1996): 16-22.

³⁹ Elly Fontaine-van der Heijden, interviews by the author, 21 Nov. 2002, 19 May 2003, 22-23 May 2004.

⁴⁰ Eugene van der Heijden, "Grensprikelen," 21-24.

⁴¹ Eugene Van der Heijden, interview, 1994, Verzetsmuseum, Amsterdam.

C. Citroen, from Amsterdam, who was fleeing the raids aimed at Jews in July 1942, wrote of how on his arrival with a friend at the Van der Heijden home at one o'clock on a Sunday morning, they were treated to a meal of coffee, bread, butter, and cheese in the Van der Heijdens' big Brabant kitchen, then taken to a fresh, clean bedroom, where they were wished a good night. The next morning, they were treated to a "good old Dutch breakfast." During the morning Citroen played the piano while the entire family sang. Later two *marechaussees* stopped by, had a cup of coffee, and smoked a cigarette. At noon there was a bounteous warm meal, after which they were given their fake Belgian ID cards. At one o'clock that afternoon, it was time to leave for the border.⁴²

But housing people fleeing the Nazis was not all the family did. The father, Josephus Cornelis, and the son, Eugene, regularly guided people to Brussels. Eugene, a teacher, had to work around his teaching schedule, using weekends and vacation periods for guiding. The mother, Elisabeth, her other sons, Marcel, Gustaf, Willy, and Jef, and daughters, Lisette and Elly, also assisted.⁴³

The first escape route

With the Van der Heijdens now helping, the essential elements of the escape line were in place. After crossing the border, the guides and their charges made for the Belgian town of Weelde, a little over four miles distant (see fig. 6).⁴⁴ Their objective was the café of Maria Segers-Ooms at Groote Baan no. D56.⁴⁵ One traveler described it as a very Belgian café: "Its façade covered with all kinds of enamelled advertisements inviting one to partake of a variety of drinks or to become a member of some insurance company or another."⁴⁶ To the left of the café was the butcher shop of Maria's husband, Cornelis. Their living quarters was in the back of the building. Behind that was an inner courtyard and small stables used to raise animals or hold those that were to be slaughtered. The guides, their charges, and the general public used the stables to store their bicycles until their return. The café was very much in the center of the town, with the church and city hall directly across the street and the bus stop out front. Only beer and wine were sold in the café, with Maria

⁴² Lenck, *Vlucht*, 19-21.

⁴³ Eugene van der Heijden, "De Oude Trambaan," *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 86 (Sept. 1995) 21-25; Jan Naaijkens, "Eugène van der Heijden: the salt of the earth, memories of a friend," *De Hilverbode* (1 May 2003), 9.

⁴⁴ Van der Heijden interview, Verzetsmuseum.

⁴⁵ Karst Smit, letter to RIOD.

⁴⁶ Dourlein, Pieter, *Inside North Pole* (London: William Kimber, 1953), 139.

running the bar.⁴⁷ For visitors preferring anonymity, the café could be entered from the rear via the courtyard. In her kitchen Maria fed free of charge all the people Karst's organization brought through, even providing them Belgian francs when they were short of money.

While waiting for transportation to their next stop, they might wait in a back room or prefer to relax in the café with some ersatz coffee or a beer.⁴⁸ The Segers-Ooms business was also a place where, if necessary, Karst and his men could change clothes and obtain information on German patrols on the Belgian side of the border.⁴⁹ "This data was crucial because returning to the Netherlands was considerably more dangerous since it was impossible to approach the Belgian side of the border without being seen."⁵⁰

To travel from Weelde to Turnhout, guides of the fugitives had two options, use an old-fashioned steam tram or a charcoal gas-powered bus. The former was safer because it carried farmers with baskets full of chickens for market and rarely experienced any German controls. Use of the latter may have been preferred when the departure and connection times worked better. Guides and their charges did not sit together on such trips for safety reasons.⁵¹

From Turnhout to Antwerp they used high-speed electric tram number forty-one, which could reach forty-four miles per hour and make the trip in one hour and twenty minutes.⁵² The cream-colored trams consisted of a motorcar and one or two trailer cars.⁵³ Normally the trip took place without incident but on 20 August 1943, Karst was guiding Sgt. George Duffee of the RAF on the tram to Antwerp.⁵⁴

To their dismay, at the town of Schilde, one of the intermediate stops, German police surrounded the tram and checked the ID of everyone getting off. Then, as the tram was about to get underway again, two members of the German *Feldgendarmarie*, the uniformed military police wearing their distinctive crescent-shaped gorgets, boarded and began a systematic examination of everyone's papers. It was a Friday

⁴⁷ Laurent Woestenburg, president, Weelde historical society, and members of the society, interview by the author, Sept. 2004.

⁴⁸ J. E. Van Loon-Boon, interview by Marlies van Rijn, 3; Dourlein, *Inside*, 139.

⁴⁹ Karst Smit, interview by *Omroep Baarle* (Baarle-Nassau radio station), 3 July 1994.

⁵⁰ De Graaf, *Stepping Stones*, 64.

⁵¹ Karst Smit, interview by *Omroep Baarle*; Eugene van der Heijden, letter to Paul Pouwels, 30 May 1995.

⁵² Karst Smit, interview by the author.

⁵³ Barbara Van den Bossche and Eric Keutgens, Vlaams Tram- en Autobusmuseum, Antwerp, email to Keith Morley, 16 Nov. 2009, and timetable for Aug. 1941.

⁵⁴ George W. H. Duffee, Appendix C, M.I.9/S/P.G.(-)1465, National Archives, Kew, London.

morning, and the tram was crowded with commuters. For that reason, Karst and Duffee had given up their seats and were standing on the rear platform. Even though both men had false IDs, any questioning of Duffee would mean his exposure. But Karst knew that the tram line took them on a curve around a huge abandoned fort in a forested area a little beyond the village of Wijnegem where the tram would have to slow down. Karst motioned to Duffee to join him in stalling by pretending to have difficulty finding in which pockets they had their IDs. The German MP in their car, impatient, continued on down the aisle, intending to return to them. Finally, Karst gave Duffee the signal and, ducking under the platform railing, both left off. The *Feldgendarmarie* shouted, "Halt! Halt!" But the tram driver, realizing what was happening, delayed stopping the tram, and the two men were able to disappear into the forest. They made their way to a nearby village café, and each man had a lemonade to settle his nerves. George asked Karst, "Now what do we do?" to which Karst replied, "We catch the next tram!"⁵⁵

Fabricating false IDs

Guiding someone across the border into Belgium and taking the person to Brussels was futile if the person was arrested at a check point for failure to have a valid Belgian ID. Fortunately, making a false Belgian ID was far easier than making a false Dutch ID. The Belgian ID had been imposed by the Germans in the First World War and remained little changed. It had the person's photo, signature, basic information, and the official stamp of the city where issued. The *marechaussees*, when they apprehended professional Belgian smugglers, would confiscate their IDs. Jef van der Heijden, who was sixteen in 1942 when his family began aiding fugitives, taught himself photography and would take a person's photo. The new photo and a confiscated smuggler's ID then went to a school teacher, Jan Naaijken, a close friend of Eugene van der Heijden, who would remove the original photograph, substitute the new one, and painstakingly replicate on it the portion of the official city stamp that had been on the original photo. The person fleeing the Netherlands now had an ID that would stand up to routine inspection.⁵⁶

One drawback to using a confiscated smuggler's ID was that it might be so well-thumbed and creased that it did not look at all like what a middle class individual traveling to Brussels would be carrying.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Eugene van der Heijden, "Het verzet in ons dorp," *De Hilverbode*, 10 Dec. 1948. Karst Smit, "Travamontuur," 28-30.

⁵⁶ Van der Heijden, "Het verzet," 25 Oct. 1947.

⁵⁷ Van der Heijden, "Identiteitskaarten," *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 89 (June 1996): 24-27.

For a time they were able to get good-quality false IDs by sending the fugitives' photos to their contact, Jean Krauss, in Brussels, who knew where to get blank cards. His sister, Marie, would deliver the finished product to Hilvarenbeek.⁵⁸ In 1943, however, there was a falling-out between Karst and the Krauss family over payment. The latter wanted to be paid for each airman's ID, something that was intolerable to Karst since he and his men had been paying out of their own salaries the costs of helping people. They found a solution. A paper wholesaler provided them with paper the exact same weight and shade of green as used in official Belgian IDs. Jan Naaijkens drew an image of St. George slaying the dragon that matched that used in the Brussels city seal. A stationers store in Tilburg put them in touch with a stereotype factory in Amsterdam. The factory workers, in exchange for a slab of bacon donated by a friendly farmer, made a stereotype plate that the Naaijkens' family printing press could use to generate false Belgian IDs identical to the real ones. Working overnight at the printing press in the family basement, when his family was asleep, Jan and his brother produced five hundred false IDs by morning.⁵⁹

The student hideout: an additional way station for fugitives

Mass arrests of university students in February 1943 in retaliation for the assassination of General Hendrik A. Seyffardt were followed by a compulsory oath of loyalty to the Third Reich that students had to sign by 10 April or become subject to the labor draft.⁶⁰ Among those who went into hiding to avoid forced labor in Germany were three forestry students from the University of Wageningen—Dick Los, Jan Wolterson, and Jan de Konink. Los and de Konink were already familiar with *Landgoed de Utrecht* because of forestry training there in 1942. Using their forestry expertise, they built a hideout in the forest where they could stay for the time being. They were joined periodically by two other forestry students also from the University of Wageningen, Jan Oudemans, who was living in Esbeek, and Jan van Dongen, who was staying with a family friend in Hilvarenbeek. While patrolling the forest during the summer of 1943, Karst came across the students' hideout. Realizing that it would be a valuable additional way station in the escape route, he enlisted them into the escape line. Jan Wolterson said that becoming a part of the escape line "gave us a reason for living."

⁵⁸ Van der Heijden, "Mademoiselle," *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 84 (Mar. 1995): 32-36.

⁵⁹ Van der Heijden, "Identiteitskaarten," 28.

⁶⁰ Maass, *Netherlands*, 79, 140. Warmbrunn, *German Occupation*, 150-51.



Fig. 12.4. Dick Los and Jan van Dongen having breakfast in the hideout (courtesy Jan Wolterson)

By November 1943, when the weather became too cold to stay there, they moved into a chicken coop on the nearby De Bruijn farm which they insulated with bales of compressed hay. For several months in 1943, Allied airmen, Jews, Engelandvaarders, and others stayed at their hideout for one or more nights before being guided across the border.⁶¹

Practical considerations—costs, fuel, mail

The cost of running the escape line was a problem, particularly as the number of refugees increased. Karst and other members of the line had to pay for the train, bus, and tram tickets for the people they were guiding as well as for themselves. They also provided their charges with pocket money in Belgian currency and paid for the cost of feeding them in Belgium. To the extent that they could, Karst and the others paid the costs out of their own pockets. But they also took advantage of the demand in the Netherlands for tobacco. When the *marechaussees* apprehended Belgian smugglers carrying tobacco, they confiscated the tobacco. Karst's sister, Gerda, who worked in one of the government ministries in The Hague, sold it to government employees.⁶² Later, one of their contacts with another escape line, Alphonse Theissing of the Dutch-Paris Line, provided financial help.⁶³

Speedy transport of fugitives out of the Netherlands was a priority. The *marechaussee* headquarters in Baarle-Nassau had a pre-

⁶¹ Karst Smit, "Zo Was Het Toen," *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 30 (Sept. 1981): 20-22; Van der Heijden, "Het verzet," 15 Nov. 1947, 10 Dec. 1948; Karst Smit, testimony of 5 Aug. 1954; Jan Wolterson, e-mails to author, 4 Jan., 6 July 2004; Joke Schilders, letter to the author, Feb. 2013.

⁶² Karst Smit, letter to RIOD; Janine Marseille-Smit, letter to the author, 2 May 2006.

⁶³ Eugene van der Heijden, "Oliemaatschappij Petronqua," *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 88 (Mar. 1996): 21-25.



Fig. 12.5. Karst Smit and *marechaussees* on their BMW motorcycle
(courtesy Janine Marseille-Smit)

war BMW motorcycle equipped with a sidecar that was ideal for this purpose, but there was not enough gasoline to operate it more than twice a month. But Piet van Geel, a straw merchant in Hilvarenbeek, had a contract with the German Wehrmacht to provide straw for their men and horses. In order to make his deliveries, the Germans supplied him with gasoline for his truck. He, in turn, shared the fuel with the *marechaussees*!⁶⁴ Typically, Karst would pick up an evading Allied airman at the Tilburg train station. The two men would cross the street in front of the station to a hotel where Karst would have the airman don the top half of a *marechaussee's* uniform including the hat. With the airman sitting in the side car of the motorcycle, they would head for the border. One airman gave this description: "Now there followed a rather frantic and dangerous ride on a motorbike over wide main roads, through quiet avenues and narrow sandy paths until we arrived in a forest some 5 km. from the Belgian border."⁶⁵

Karst and his contacts in Brussels needed to be able to correspond with each other regularly about deliveries of their "packages" to Brussels, but international mail was subject to inspection by the Germans, making it too risky to send across the border. Karst's solution was two

⁶⁴ Karst Smit, "Regio Noord-en Zuid-Holland," *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 79 (Dec. 1993): 13-14.

⁶⁵ Duffee, 23 Juni 1943, "Halifax" *EYS Keerde Niet Terug, Pilotenhulp tijdens de oorlog* (Rosmalen: the author, 1985), 50-51.

fold. He knew Constant Heeren, the proprietor of a café on the Dutch side of the border. Heeren's sister-in-law, Octavia Schoeters, who lived in Poppel on the Belgian side, worked in Heeren's café and needed to cross the border regularly. Equipped with a pass, she could cross back and forth without drawing attention from the German border guards. Hidden in her underwear was Karst's outgoing mail which she would pick up at the café and deposit in the mail in Poppel. For incoming mail, Karst had an arrangement with Jeanne Willems who lived in a farmhouse in Belgium a few hundred yards from the border. Her home became a mail drop for incoming correspondence. It was an easy matter for Karst to visit her farm and pick up his mail.⁶⁶

Expanding the line

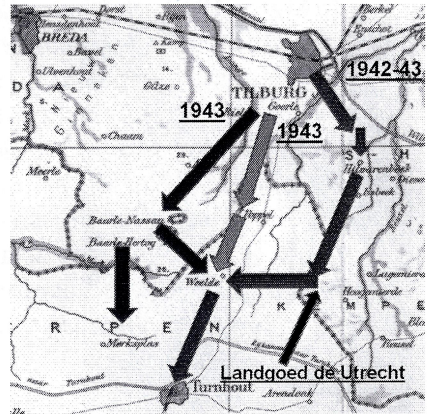
In early 1943, Karst received a phone call from the regional *marechaussee* commander, H. de Wilde, asking him to come see him in his home in Tilburg. This was unheard of! The commander never spoke to enlisted men much less invite them to his home. During their subsequent conversation, De Wilde told Karst that he knew what Karst was doing and had been asked to assist him. De Wilde was known to fraternize with German officers, but he assured Karst that it was just a "cover." After consulting with his men and warning De Wilde of the consequences of betrayal, Karst accepted the offer. What he needed, Karst told De Wilde, was the transfer of two of his *marechaussees*, David Jonkers and Huub Meeuwisse, to the town of Goirle just south of Tilburg and himself to the town of Baarle-Nassau, where Karst already had friends. That would still leave three trusted *marechaussees* in Hilvarenbeek. Within a week the transfers were complete. Karst now had three escape routes giving him more flexibility as to where and when he and his men could cross the border when guiding people to Brussels and reducing the risk of gossip about the many strangers passing through a single location.⁶⁷ An additional benefit in the case of Baarle-Nassau was its unique nature; it was actually two towns: Baarle-Nassau (Dutch) and Baarle-Hertog (Belgian), jumbled together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle only three or four miles from the Belgian border, making it difficult for the Germans to keep track of, much less control the traffic across the border.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Karst Smit, letter to RIOD; Karst Smit, interview by the author.

⁶⁷ Karst Smit, letter to RIOD; Karst Smit, interview by Frans Dekkers and Wim Klinkenberg, 13 Dec. 1980, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

⁶⁸ Karst Smit, "Baarle Nassau-Hertog," *Escape Nieuwsbulletin*, no. 80 (Mar. 1994): 26-28.

Fig. 12.6. Three escape routes



Karst's next need was for more guides to spread out the workload. During 1942-43, he noticed four young Belgian women smugglers, the Claes sisters, crossing the border three times a week, but realizing they were not professionals, he left them alone. One morning, however, after coming off night patrol duty along the border, he found three of them locked up in a cell at the Baarle-Nassau *marechaussee* barracks. The local *marechaussee* commander, Christian de Gier, was a strict, by-the-book policeman and had arrested them for smuggling. Karst promptly released them, and they hopped on their bikes and rode home. Invited over for the weekend to their home in Vorselaar, Belgium, by their grateful father, Karst became friendly with the family. They owned a small diamond-polishing factory that was shut down during the war because of a lack of raw materials. He asked if the sisters would be willing to assist by guiding fugitives from the Nazis, since they knew the smuggling routes even better than he did. His plan was to have them guide escaped French POWs. They immediately agreed, even though they were told nothing about the men they were helping. Their instructions were to meet at a large oak tree between Hilvarenbeek and Esbeek, pick up the men, who would be waiting, and guide them to Turnhout. The young women were under instructions not to talk to the men, and they guided anywhere from just one man to an entire group at a time, with everyone walking a safe distance apart to reduce the risk of their all being arrested. En route to Turnhout, they would spend the night at the Van der Pol family farm near Poppel, with the sisters delivering the Frenchmen to the tram station in Turnhout the next morning.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Hans Otten, e-mail message to the author, 30 Aug. 2010; Smit, "Nachtjas," 27-29; Van der Heijden, "De Oude Trambaan," 21-25; Cathy Cassiman, letter to the author, 23 Nov. 2010.

In March 1943, while patrolling the border at Baarle-Nassau, Karst noticed a young man who had been crossing it regularly. Questioning him, Karst learned that he was a student by the name of Willem Schmidt from the University of Utrecht, who was working for the underground newspaper, *Trouw*. Schmidt would deliver copies of the latest issue to Dutch nationals living in the area of Mechelen in Belgium. At first, Karst assisted Schmidt in crossing the border. Then he asked Schmidt if he would be willing to act as a guide. Schmidt immediately agreed and took on this responsibility for the next eight months, until the line was penetrated by the Germans the following November.⁷⁰

Brussels reception center

After the falling out with the Krauss family in Brussels over their demand for payment to aid Allied airmen, Karst was in need of a new reception center for the fugitives, particularly the airmen who had begun to arrive in June 1943.⁷¹ Briefly, Karst used the home of Pieter Neven, director of the Princess Juliana School (the Dutch school) in Brussels. From June to August, at least three airmen stayed there.⁷² But with the Nevens family living above the school, it may have been too exposed a location to continue to use.⁷³ So Karst approached Jan Maaskant, the Protestant pastor in Brussels, whose sermons Karst had attended. Maaskant gave him a contact who, in turn, put Karst in touch with Elise Chabot and her daughter, Charlotte Ambach.⁷⁴

Elise Chabot was from a wealthy Rotterdam family and had married a German. With the Nazi takeover in Germany, Chabot, who was fiercely anti-Nazi, separated from her husband and moved with her two daughters to Brussels. They became active in the resistance, and when approached by Karst, they were very open to his request for using their apartment as a reception center for arriving airmen.⁷⁵ Approximately thirty-one Allied airmen arrived there between July and November 1943.⁷⁶ The airmen usually were delivered to the Ambach-

⁷⁰ Karst Smit, testimony of 5 Aug. 1954.

⁷¹ Eugene van der Heijden, "De Studenten," 16.

⁷² *Vragenlijst* of Pieter Neven, 7 Jan. 1946, Neven helper file, NARA, NAI, College Park, MD, UD171: MIS-X Files, Belgium, 1945-47.

⁷³ "Document A15, Description of the Ausens [*sic*] route," unsigned report probably written by A. W. M. Ausems, from the file of Oreste Pinto, National Archives, The Hague.

⁷⁴ Karst Smit, interview by Dekker and Klinkenberg; Karst Smit, interview by the author.

⁷⁵ Charlotte Ambach, interview by the author, 30 Apr., 3 Aug. 2002.

⁷⁶ Service EVA Fiche d'Agent of Elise Chabot, Chabot helper file, NARA, NAI, College Park, MD, UD183: MIS-X Files, Holland, 1945-47.



Fig. 12.7. Elise Chabot and Charlotte Ambach (courtesy Archives Générales du Royaume, Brussels and Charlotte Ambach)

Chabot residence by Karst, Eugene van der Heijden, or Willem Schmidt. From there they would be passed on to other resistance organizations, such as Service EVA and Fiat Libertas.

Intelligence gathering and intelligence agents

Collection of intelligence was an incidental part of the work of the Smit-Van der Heijden Line. For example, maps showing installations—hangers, gas storage tanks, and more—for Havelte and Gilze-Rijen airfields were passed on to intelligence contacts.⁷⁷ The Gilze-Rijen airfield in Noord Brabant was particularly important because the Heinkel and Junkers bombers that attacked British cities were based there.⁷⁸ Every evading airman helped by the escape line who successfully returned to England was debriefed by intelligence officers. What they learned was summarized in the appendix B of the airman's escape and evasion report, and copies were distributed to all concerned parties.⁷⁹

A special category of persons helped by the Smit-Van der Heijden Line were Dutch secret agents, most notably Pieter Dourlein and Johan Ubbink. Having parachuted into the Netherlands, they were captured by the Germans as part of the German operation "North Pole," also

⁷⁷ Van der Heijden, "Het verzet," 7 Feb. 1948; Jack Justice, letter to "Nico and Kees," 13 June 1945, NIOD Collection, Verzet-Noord Brabant, Doc. II-858.

⁷⁸ Gilze-Rijen, Netherlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie, Ministerie van Defensie, http://www.defensie.nl/nimh/geschiedenis/vliegvelden/vliegveldoverzicht/46190366/gilze_rijen/.

⁷⁹ Ottis, *Silent Heroes*, 19. Escape and evasion reports of American airmen from the Second World War are available online from NARA.

known as *Englandspiel*, the greatest German counterespionage triumph in which they routinely captured Dutch secret agents and “turned” them to work for Germany. Dourlein and Ubbink escaped from the prison at Haaren and were assisted in crossing into Belgium by Karst’s men, thereby getting word back to London as to what had happened.⁸⁰

Destruction of the line

On 15 November 1943, guide Willem Schmidt and an American airman were arrested at the Turnhout train station. Under duress, Schmidt provided names. The Smit-Van der Heijden Line collapsed. Karst and Eugene went into hiding after attempting to warn everyone. Four members of the Van der Heijden family were arrested, three of whom died in concentration camps—Josephus, Marcel, and Gustaf. Two of the students, Jan Oudemans and Jan de Konink, were sent to concentration camps and never returned.⁸¹ Another, Jan van Dongen, was shot the following year by a German death squad.⁸² In all, thirteen members of the line were executed or died as a result of their concentration camp experiences. Fifteen survived prison or concentration camps, some with serious physical or emotional damage. In the twenty months the line was active, it aided approximately forty-three airmen, 150 Dutch Jews, three secret agents, thirty *Engelandvaarders*, from eighty to ninety French POWs, and forty families with husbands in hiding.⁸³ Karst joined another escape line, was betrayed, arrested, and survived four concentration camps. After the Liberation, he was part of the investigative team of the Netherlands War Crimes Commission.⁸⁴ His decorations included the Medal of Freedom with Silver Palm (US), Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) (UK), and Knight of the Order of Oranje Nassau (NL).⁸⁵

Why did they risk it?

In her *Memoirs*, Elsa Caspers explained simply:

⁸⁰ Ben Ubbink to David Jonkers, 11 Apr. 1979, from personal papers of David Jonkers; Hubertus Meeuwisse, “Over Leven,” memoirs of Meeuwisse, Dec. 1997, 30.

⁸¹ Vragenlijst of Johannes Oudemans, 18 Apr. 1946, Oudemans helper file, NARA, NAI, UD183: MIS-X Files, Holland, 1945-47.

⁸² Eugene van der Heijden, “De studenten,” 43.

⁸³ Report by Karst Smit, 16 July 1945, Smit helper file, NARA, NAI, UD183: MIS-X Files, Holland, 1945-47.

⁸⁴ “Extract from the Service Records . . . Concerning Smit, Karst Gerrit,” Karst Smit, interview by the author.

⁸⁵ Karst Smit, interview by the author; display in honor of Karst Smit, Marechaussee Museum, Buren, NL; Karst Smit, interview by RTL5 Television.

However hard one tries, it is never possible to reproduce in words exactly how life was lived in those days. The ever-present danger, tension, and possibility of betrayal, cannot be expressed in words. One can only try to show some of the atmosphere of life at that time. Although there were many different reasons for joining [the Resistance], there was one common denominator: not being able to endure the restriction of freedom and the infringement of the integrity of our fellow men.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Caspers, Elsa, *To Save a Life, Memoirs of a Dutch Resistance Courier* (London: A Deirdre McDonald Book, 1995), vi.