

Reading 14A
THE SECRET ROOM

(From Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, and Alan L. Lockwood, *The Secret Room in Holland*.)

Questions:

- 1. Did Corrie ten Boom do the right thing when she lied to the Germans?**
- 2. Was it right for the ten Boom to offer their house as a hiding place for Jews?**

In May 1940, Germany invaded the Netherlands. In only five days, the small nation was conquered. Approximately 140,000 Jews lived in Holland at this time. By January 1941, all Dutch were ordered to register and were issued identity cards. The cards issued to Dutch Jews had a “J” on them. In May 1942, Jews were ordered to wear a large, yellow six-pointed star with the word “Jew” printed in the center. Soon, the Germans began to round up Jews and send them to Auschwitz and other camps. The German reaction was swift and brutal: those who helped Jews were sent with them to the Nazi concentration camps.

Although she was not a Jew, 48 year old Cornelia ten Boom was profoundly affected by the “Final Solution.” She would soon be facing the most difficult decisions of her life. Cornelia recalls how some of the Nazi rules and regulations affected the people of Haarlem, the city where she lived.

The curfew too, at first, was no hardship for us, since it was originally set at 10:00 P.M., long after we were indoors in any case. What we did object to were the identity cards each citizen was issued. These small folders containing photograph and fingerprints had to be produced on demand. A soldier or a policeman – the Haarlem police were now under the direct control of the German Commandant – might stop a citizen at any time and ask to see his card; it had to be carried in a pouch about the neck . . .

Early in the occupation Haarlemers were ordered to turn in all private sets (radios). Realizing it would look strange if our household produced none at all, we decided to turn in the portable and hide the larger, more powerful instrument in one of the many hollow spaces beneath the old twisting staircase.

Both suggestions were Peter’s. He was sixteen at the time of the invasion and shared with other Dutch teenagers the restless energy of anger and impotence. Peter installed the table radio beneath a curve in the stairs just above Father’s room and expertly replaced the old boards, while I carried the smaller one down to the big Vroom en Dreesman department store where the radio collection was being made. The army clerk looked at me across the counter.

“Is this the only radio you own?”

“Yes . . .”

He consulted a list in front of him. “Ten Boom, Casper, ten Boom, Elizabeth, at the same address. Do either of them own a radio?”

I had known from childhood that the earth opened and the heavens rained fire upon liars, but I met his gaze.

“No.”

Only as I walked out of the building did I begin to tremble. Not because for the first time in my life I had told a conscious lie, but because it had been so dreadfully easy.

The hardships that the occupation caused for Corrie were minor compared to what happened to the Jewish citizens of Holland. Corrie had heard stories that Jews were being taken away in the night. Eventually, there were mass public arrests during the daytime.

Certainly public arrests, with no attempt to conceal what was happening, were becoming more frequent. One day as Father and I were returning from our walk we found the Grote Markt cordoned off by a double ring of police and soldiers. A truck was parked in front of the fish market; into the back were climbing men, women, and children, all wearing the yellow star. There was no reason we could see why this particular place at this particular time had been chosen.

“Father! Those poor people!” I cried.

Not all of the Dutch people were as horrified as Corrie. Some of them joined the National Socialist Bond (NSB), an organization sympathetic to the Germans. Members of the NSB received extra benefits from the Germans--more food and clothing; better jobs and housing. The ten Boom family did not join the NSB. Instead, they became involved in the Dutch underground – an organization that helped hide and protect Jews.

Finding safe places for Jewish people was risky business. The ten Booms realized that if they were discovered they would be arrested and probably executed. Nonetheless, they believed their work was worth the risk.

The underground decided that a tiny, secret room should be built in the ten Boom house. It was to be in Corrie’s bedroom. A Mr. Smit designed the hiding place:

He moved the heavy, wobbly old wardrobe away from the wall with surprising ease and pulled my bed into the center of the room. “This is where the false wall will go.” Excitedly he drew out a pencil and drew a line along the floor thirty inches from the back wall. He stood up and gazed at it moodily.

“That’s as big as I dare,” he said. “It will take a cot mattress, though. Oh yes. Easily!”

Over the next few days he and his workmen were in and out of the hose constantly. They never knocked. At each visit each man carried something. Tools folded in a folded newspaper. A few bricks in a briefcase. "Wood!" he exclaimed when I ventured to wonder is a wooden wall would not be easier to build. "Wood sounds hollow. Hear it in a minute. No, no. Brick's the only thing for false walls."

After the wall was up, the plaster came, then the carpenter, finally the painter. Six days after he had begun, Mr. Smit called Father, Betsie, and me to see.

We stood in the doorway and gaped. The smell of fresh paint was everywhere. But surely nothing in this room was newly painted! All four walls had that streaked grimy look that old rooms got in coal-burning Haarlem. The ancient molding ran unbroken around the ceiling, chipped and peeling here and there, obviously undisturbed for a hundred and fifty years. Old water stained streaked the back wall, a wall that even I who had lived half a century in this room, could scarcely believe it was not the original, but set back a precious two-and-a-half feet from the true wall of the building.

Mr. Smit stopped and silently pulled this panel up. On hands and knees Betsie and I crawled into the narrow room behind it. Once inside we could stand up, sit, or even stretch out one at a time on the single mattress. A concealed vent, cunningly let into the real wall, allowed air to enter from outside.

With his fist he struck the wall above the bookshelves. "The Gestapo could search for a year," he said. "They'll never find this one."

The ten Boom house with its secret room became the key point in a network that spread throughout Haarlem and into the countryside. Countless numbers of escaping Jews passed through the house on their way to other safe places. An illegal, secret telephone was installed so the communication could be maintained with other members of the underground. Elaborate procedures were established in case a raid by the Gestapo; a raid that seemed inevitable given the increased activity in their house.

One procedure was designed to make sure that, in the event of a night raid, Corrie would not groggily give away the hiding place.

Over and over again the group worked with me – Nils, Henk, Leedert – bursting into my room without warning, shaking me awake, hurling questions at me.

The first time it happened I was sure that the real raid had come. There was a terrific pounding on my door, then the beam of a flashlight in my eyes. "Get up! On your feet!" I could not see the man who was speaking.

"Where are you hiding your nine Jews?"

"We only have six Jews now."

There was an awful silence. The room light came on to show Rolf clutching his head with his hands. “Oh no. Oh no,” he kept saying. “It can’t be that bad.”

“Think now,” said Henk just behind him. “The Gestapo is trying to trap you. The answer is, “What Jews? We don’t have Jews here.”

Gradually, with repeated drills, I got better. Still, when the time actually came, when they were real Gestapo agents really trained in getting the truth from people, how would I perform?

Indeed, the raid did come. Corrie was brusquely awakened by the Gestapo.

“Tell me now, where are you hiding the Jews?” “I don’t know what you’re talking about. . .”

“Where are the Jews?”

“There aren’t any Jews here.”

The man struck me hard across the face.

“Where do you hide the ration cards?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

The man hit me again. I staggered up against the astronomical clock. Before I could recover he slapped me again, then again, and again, stinging blows that jerked my head backward.

“Where are the Jews?”

Another blow.

“Where is your secret room?”

I tasted blood in my mouth. My head spun, my ears rang – I was losing consciousness.

Corrie was arrested but never revealed the location of the hiding place nor admitted that she had given aid to fleeing Jews. She was taken to a number of camps and prisons and suffered greatly both psychologically and physically. Eventually, she was taken to Ravensbruck, a concentration camp in Germany. For some reason, she was released. She revisited the camp in 1959 and discovered that her release was the result of an error made by a clerk, for a week after she left, all women her age were executed. Despite Dutch aid to Jews and resistance to the Nazis, 110,000 of the Jews in the Netherlands were killed in the Holocaust.