ARIE VAN MANSUM – the NETHERLANDS

Arie van Mansum

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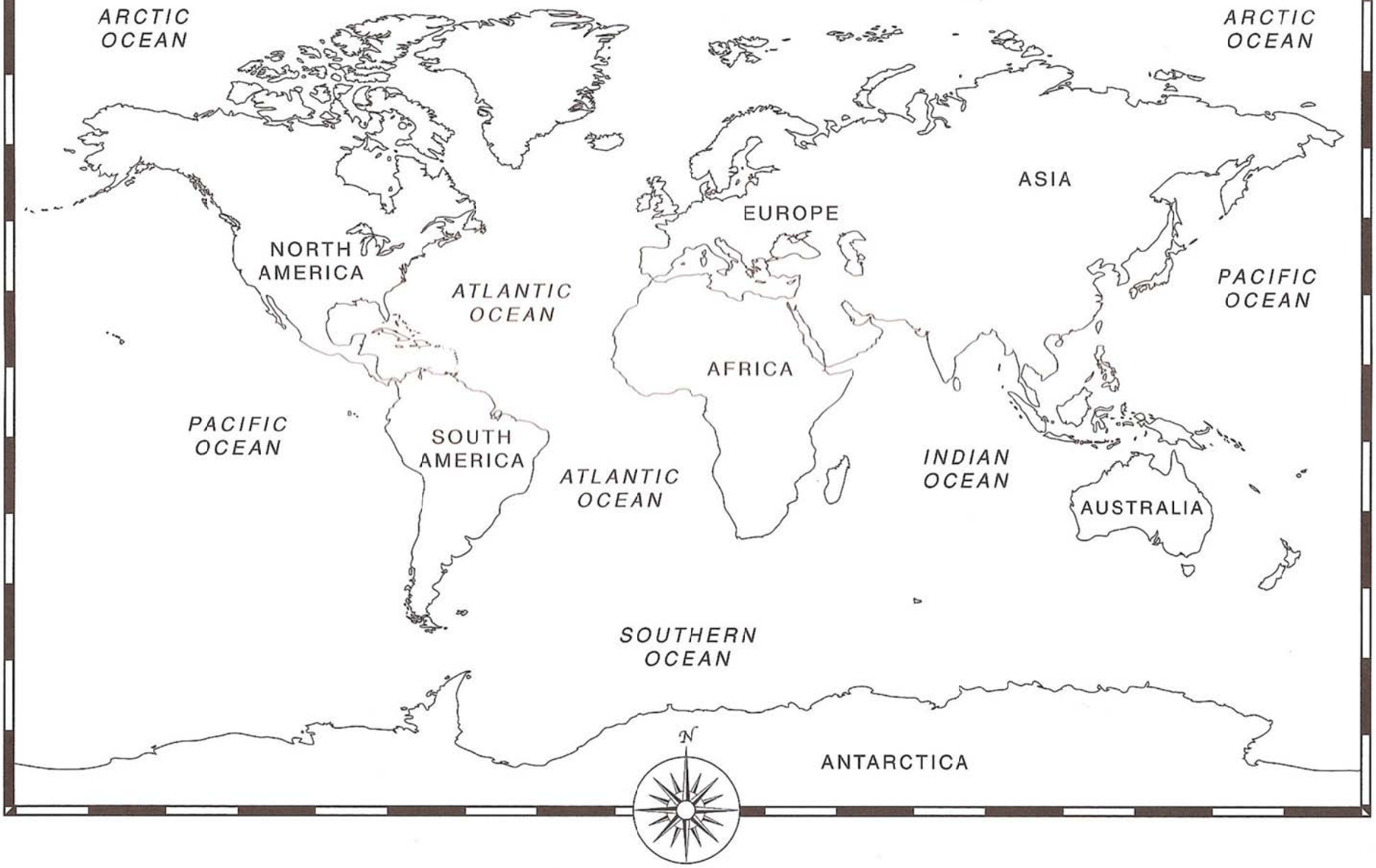
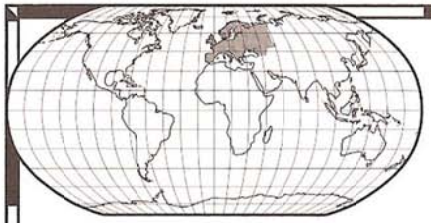
The World: Political Map



Europe: Political Map



1 Belgium
2 Luxembourg
3 Switzerland
4 Liechtenstein
5 Andorra
6 Monaco
7 Vatican City (Holy See)
8 San Marino
9 Slovenia
10 Croatia
11 Bosnia and Herzegovina
12 Serbia and Montenegro
13 Albania
14 Macedonia
15 Turkey (European)
16 Slovakia
17 Moldova
18 Georgia (European)
19 Azerbaijan (European)
20 Russia (Kaliningrad)

Arie van Mansum risked his life dozens of times; he is every inch a hero, but no one would ever guess this by meeting him. An insurance broker in the agency he founded when he moved to Ottawa after the war, he lives in a pretty and neat home on a quiet street. It requires imagination to understand the passionate character of this man who gives a diffident, laconic, and occasionally mumbled account of his wartime deeds. Yet once we see past the lack of facial and verbal expression, we notice him clench his fists in anger as he talks about the Dutch collaborators, especially of those who were not punished after the war. And when he tells us how he felt after the war, when he saw Jews once again walking down the streets of Maastricht, he smiles with tears in his eyes.

Well, the Holocaust didn't start with the Germans picking up Jews and sending them to concentration camps and putting them in gas chambers. The Holocaust started in the hearts of the people. As soon as you go and say, "That Jew!" or whatever, that's where it starts, you know. That was the beginning. As soon as you put one race higher than another one, you get that.

I was born in 1920 in Utrecht, but we moved to Maastricht in the south of Holland when I was six years old. I was the second child, one sister was older and one brother and sister were younger. We were simple people with not much education. My father was a laborer with the Dutch railroad, and I was very close to my mother, who stayed home with the children.

We were members of the Reform Church of the Netherlands, which is more strict than the Dutch Reformed. When we moved to Maastricht we were in the minority because the city was 90 percent Catholic. There were about seventy or eighty Jewish families but we didn't know them. We had no contact because we were a laborer's family and the Jews were businesspeople; we went to the Protestant school and they went to public school. In 1939, I was active in the young people's group of our church, and we went to a meeting at City Hall to discuss what to do about refugees coming in from Germany. I was the representative from the church, to try to decide how to help them. You couldn't tell the difference between Jews in Holland and others, anyway. But we had no chance to make any decisions before the war broke out.

In 1940, I was working as a traveling salesman for a wholesale wallpaper company. A man from my church who was an accountant for some Jewish people asked me to become the representative for distributing the underground newspaper, *Free Netherlands*. I agreed, and every month I took 500 to 1,000 newspapers and distributed them on my trips. I came in contact with an elder in the Reformed Church, Van Assen, who told me a Jewish family needed help, and asked if I would accompany them to the hiding place he had found for them. I did it. Then, after I had done more of this, he approached me to find a hiding place for a Jewish family. I contacted Mrs. Freilich and found a place for her and her daughter in Heerlen. But her son, Fritz, looked too Jewish, so I took him home myself. He was my age and my parents liked him. He had to stay in the house all the time, since he looked so Jewish, but it was through him that I came into contact with more families who

needed help. Then I needed to get food stamps for all these people. I figured out a way to forge the food-stamp cards, and every week I went from one food-stamp office to another to get them because I needed so many. Soon I was getting 150 ration cards, and I finally met a man in the food-stamp office who was willing to get them all for me. When I needed 250 cards to deal with he got scared, so then a man who was the head of the police department in Haarlem did it for me.

One day some students in Amsterdam contacted me. The Germans were putting all the Jewish children together in the nursery, and the overflow in a converted theater across the street. Each day when the Germans took them out for a walk, the students would kidnap some of them and take them to hiding places in other parts of Holland. I began finding places for them, mostly in the south of Holland because there people had come from Poland and were darker skinned, so it was easier for a Jewish child to live among them. One day I was told of a Jewish boy in the hospital who would be shipped to Westerbork if we didn't get him out. I had a friend who was a nurse and she rescued him. I placed him with a Catholic family where he stayed till the end of the war.

Another time I needed to find a place for a baby fast because the family had already been summoned to Westerbork. My mother said she would take this eleven-day-old baby, and my girl friend and I went to pick her up. People thought we were a married couple with a newborn child. My mother really loved that baby. Later I placed another baby someplace else. I could go on telling these stories. Every day a new problem came up that I had to figure out a way to solve.

I quit my job and did this resistance work full-time. Every month I visited the people I had placed to take them food stamps and mail with news from their families. Many were very depressed, and I had the opportunity to lift them up a little and they appreciated that.

I was still living at home with my parents, and my sister, Margaretha, helped me as well. When I was arrested in October 1943, she took over all the work I had been doing. I ended up in Haeren in prison, for six months of solitary confinement.

Then I was sent to Amersfoort concentration camp until September 1944. I was mistreated during interrogation, and was scared to death like anyone else. According to me, the Germans were stupid. When they arrested me, I had some addresses on me of families in hiding, but they never checked them out. I was taking care of about a hundred people, but they never found them. Only one family I had placed, the Weslys, was found and arrested, and the son was killed. A three-year-old boy. But this wasn't because of the list.

I was released from prison in Utrecht, which was in an area already liberated by the Allies. I couldn't go home because Maastricht was still occupied, so I stayed in Utrecht with an aunt and began underground work again. I was delivering *Free Netherlands* when I was again arrested in February 1945, and sent back to the concentration camp. I stayed there until the end of the war. All this time my sister did the work with the food stamps and the families in hiding that I had been doing. She died last year of a stroke at sixty-five, in Holland.

The baby stayed with my mother until June 1945, when the parents picked her up. It was hard on my mother; she was very attached. But the parents said, "We don't have family anymore. Can we adopt you as grandparents?" So we all remained like family until they emigrated to Israel.

I'll tell you, the best years of my life were when I could help Jews in the wartime. That was one of the best time periods of my life because it gave such satisfaction. I mean, the moment that I came back from prison in May 1945, I walked through the streets of Maastricht, and I saw Jews walking there, Jews I helped in the wartime, I started to cry. That was the satisfaction, you know. You saw those people walking through the street! And then it was a double satisfaction when I saw them in Israel, in their own country. It was fabulous!

Fritz lives in Belgium now. He is the secretary of the Jewish community. I moved to Canada because I was very disappointed in Holland. Many people who did no resistance work took the most prominent positions after the war. I'll give you an

example. I had a friend I worked with, he was a Socialist, a teacher in the public high school. And one day he approached me. He said, "There's a Jewish family, the Schmidt family, and the chances are that they're gonna pick them up, either today or tomorrow. We need a place for them quick! Please help."

So I found a temporary place for the family, a family with four children. They were a poor family, he had a used furniture store. So that night we went over to get the people from their house and when we were sitting and they were packing, all of a sudden two Dutch policemen came in and told them that a Gestapo van would come in an hour or so to pick them up. And they asked us what we were doing there. We said, "Well, we were just buying some furniture." And he said, "You'll have to discuss that with the trustees because you'll have to leave now." So we walked outside and waited, walked up and down in front of the house for over an hour. One policeman came out to call the Germans because it was taking so long for the van to come to pick up these people. I asked that policeman, "Please, stay away for half an hour—give us a chance." He said, "I'm sorry, sir, I'm just doing my duty." This family was picked up and never returned. But this same man, after the war, got a promotion in the regular police force. That made me so furious. And besides, this policeman was assigned to the police force responsible for punishing NSBers. We registered a complaint when we saw him but nothing was done. They said he was just doing his duty. And those people were all picked up, the six people, and none of them came back. That makes you furious!

But I still say there was nothing special about what I did. I did what *everyone* should have done. Those people who did nothing on either side were scared and only looked after themselves. But I had feelings during wartime, and after the wartime even more, that I could have done more. I remember one day when I was walking through a rail station and a train came in loaded with Jewish people in those, you know, those livestock wagons. I, I stood there, you know, and I could do nothing, you know.

All of my Jewish friends are in Israel now, and we're like one big family. They called a few days ago to ask when I will come again. I went to Israel for the first time in 1981, with a tourist group, and when they met me at the hotel, they were mad. They said, "You shouldn't go with a tour; you should have stayed with us." I had received my medal from Yad Vashem in 1970; my sister was one of the first to be honored. When I went to Yad Vashem to look for my tree, it wasn't there. They said, "No, we have been waiting for you to come to plant it yourself." So I said, "Okay, give me a shovel." But they said "No, it's a celebration and a ceremony." So my friends said, "You come next year and we'll pay for the trip, and you'll stay with us." But I said, "I'll pay for it." So we went back the next year. I think people don't understand what goes on in Israel. Maybe the Palestinians have a better PR department than the Israelis.

My children never knew what I did until recently. They asked, "Dad, why didn't you tell us?" But first, I'm afraid people will think I'm bragging, and I'd hate that. It's nothing to brag about. My sister went to Israel four times, and I keep in close contact, but otherwise I don't want to brag. Now, lately, some people in the Jewish community convinced me to share my story for the next generation. So I talked to kids, to churches, to memorial gatherings of Jews. And my children think it's enormous. My six-year-old grandson called and said, "Hey, Grandpa, I heard you were in jail!" So my daughter has started to tell them.

I guess I have helping in my blood. After the war a large group of people came from Indonesia, and my sister and I helped them. And here in Canada I work for a rescue mission. But, you know, not everyone had the opportunity to help during the war. I wouldn't say I had courage. If you'd have asked me before if I could have done it, I'd have said, "Oh, no, not me!" But if the moment's there and there's somebody in need, you go help, that's all.