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Words That Couldn't Be Spoken

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Words That Couldn't Be Spoken

Abstract

"In the reign of terror created by the SS in occupied Holland, no one could speak the truth—no one."

Posting about the power of words from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/words-that-couldnt-be-spoken/>

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Words That Couldn't Be Spoken

James Calvin Schaap

September 9, 2021

One day Hein told me about a family in Nijkerk, a wonderful Christian family, who he thought would help us. We had two Jewish sisters...whom we needed to hide.

So I went to this fine Christian family, and the father, a very prominent man and a pillar of the church, met me at the door. I identified myself. He knew the Sietsma family, and he knew that Hein was engaged to me. I told him that we were desperate to get a place for these two Jewish girls. We *had* to find them a place.

"No," he said. "I don't want anything to do with it."

So I started working on his status as a good Christian, and that this was part of his obligation to serve the Lord. I really pleaded with him. I begged.

Still he said no.

I was desperate. I came up with every argument I could, but he was adamant. He wouldn't budge. He wouldn't take any Jews, he said.

"Please, I beg you," I said.

"No," he said, and he shut the door of his house in my face.

When I left, I was furious with this supposedly fine man, a well-known Christian, a man of God, who wouldn't help us. (155-156)

In Nazi-occupied Holland, terror was ever present all around. If you did anything at all in resistance to the German occupiers, even if the work you did was not for the loosely organized Resistance itself, the strong possibility of significant suffering was a given. The "fine Christian man" in this anecdote in Diet Eman's story of the Dutch Resistance knows full well

that if he were to be caught hiding Jews, he would lose everything—his house, his property, his family, perhaps his life.

Slamming the door in the face of Diet and those two little Jewish girls is painfully understandable. If he had taken them in, he'd be putting his own loved ones at risk.

And yet, as I discovered when she told me her story, the horror in this particular incident, the grief and rage and exhaustion too, is all equally understandable. Diet, a girl of 19 herself, would now have to take those two little children elsewhere—but where?

She doesn't answer that question, because what she needed to tell me is how pervasive the falsehoods were—and had to be. What she wanted me to feel, as she told me and you to feel as you read, was exactly what she felt when a "fine Christian man," a "pillar of the church," quite literally slams the door in her face—and in the faces of those two Jewish girls sentenced otherwise to death. Hundreds of bold Christian men and women hid Jews in the occupied Netherlands. But many, many more did not.

However, her story didn't stop there, and neither did the man she called the "pillar of the church."

"After the war I found out that this man already had Jewish people in his home, people whom he must have taken in from some other group working to hide Jews. But he wasn't about to tell me that the reason he wouldn't take those two sisters into his house was that he already had some Jews in hiding." (156)

This fine Christian man who stood there and flat-out lied—"committed false witness," the commandments say—did so for all the *right* reasons. He shut the door to her pleading to protect himself and his family, but also, just as importantly, to protect the Jews he was already hiding.

He didn't know Diet very well, couldn't be sure this woman with the little Jewish girls wasn't planted by the Nazis to uncover the kind of hiding places he himself had created. He acted as if he didn't care—he had to. He lied to this young woman's face, slammed the door on love and charity and the goodwill of young woman at his door that night.

But he had to. Still, there's more.

He lied also to protect Diet herself. Even the resistance didn't want to know things they didn't need to—names and places—because should any of them fall into the hands of the SS, they'd be interrogated, then tortured until they gave up information. The more they knew, the more they would likely spill. Diet Eman was furious when this fine Christian man slammed the door in her face, but this pillar of the church was lying through his teeth to protect himself, his family, the Jews he was hiding, and even Diet herself.

I still have a little sticky note I long ago scribbled on when I was reading the transcript of a week-long interview I did with Diet Eman forty years later. That sticky note says, “things we couldn’t say,” the line that became the title of the book.

There was so much they couldn’t say, so much they couldn’t explain. In the reign of terror created by the SS in occupied Holland, no one could speak the truth—no one. Words weren’t meaningless, but neither were they worth their salt. Maybe prayer was the only place that words meant what they were supposed to.

The Diet Eman story holds far greater horrors—torturous suffering, death, and immense grief. But this little story’s labyrinth falsehoods, its endless subterfuge, somehow captures something of the terror created by the occupying Nazis. Ubiquitous falsehoods, a host of them perfectly righteous, were everywhere, as they had to be. So much couldn’t be said in words or even gestures.

The evil created within the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands flipped right-and-wrong wrong-and-right, redefined hosts of Dutch words, even the silence between them. Amazing—don’t you think?—how precious words become when they are not permitted to carry truth.

This essay is part of the Fall 2021 Dordt campus exploration of “Making Meaning.” We reached out to writers in our community to explore and interact with how they create meaning through words. In a culture where words can be quickly weaponized, how do we explore the beauty, truth, and gift of words? This will be part of an ongoing series where writers interact with words and with one another and delve into Making Meaning through their written voice.