Mensen, macht en mentaliteiten achter prikkeldraad: een historisch-sociologische studie van concentratiekamp Vught (1943-1944)

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Summary

Camp Vught was built in 1942 by order of the Higher SS- and Police Leader in the Netherlands Hanns Albin Rauter. It was the only concentration camp in the Netherlands that fell under the direct command of the Business Administration Main Office (WVHA) in Berlin. The camp was divided into several subcamps. It consisted of a Jewish camp, a *Schutzhaftlager* for male prisoners, a *Frauenlager*, a *Geisellager*, a *Polizeiliches Durchgangslager* and a *SD-Lager*. The historiography of camp Vught has mainly focused on the history of the male prisoners in the Schutzhaftlager and the Jewish *Funktionshäftlinge* in the *Judendurchgangslager*. Historians did not differentiate between the various groups of prisoners and paid little attention to the camp commanders, the German and Dutch SS and the *Aufseherinnen*.

This book, the first monograph on camp Vught, extracted its main themes from the German historiography, where since the mid-1980’s, the Nazi concentration camps have become the subject of sustained historical research. Based on egodocuments, such as diaries, contemporary letters, early accounts of prisoners, judicial records and memoires of later date, I researched the following questions that are central to this book: what were the objectives of the German occupying forces with regard to camp Vught? What was the socio-economic and ideological background of the camp commanders, the Dutch and German SS-guards and the *Aufseherinnen*? What was the effect of the three camp commanders who successively managed the camp on the conditions of life for the prisoners and what was the relationship between the guards and the prisoners? With regard to the subcamps I studied the way in which the hierarchy in the various sections was structured and it what way it was influenced by the social stratification of the prisoners. Furthermore, I have looked at the differences in experiences of the Jewish and non-Jewish as well as the male and female prisoners. How they experienced camp life and how they perceived their fellow-prisoners.

The objectives of camp Vught were twofold: first, it was meant as a transitional camp for Jews, and secondly, it was meant to replace the *Polizeiliches Durchgangslager* Amersfoort, where conditions of life were extremely bad. It was Rauter’s intention to make Vught into a camp were the conditions were relatively good and violence was sparsely used. In this way he hoped to conciliate the Dutch
people who were well informed about the atrocities in camp Amersfoort, which had a negative effect on their opinion of the occupying Nazi forces.

The prisoners in Vught were guarded by German and Dutch men. The most common reason for the Dutch men to join the *SS-Wachbatalion Nord-West* was that it was a well paid job and because of their ideological conviction. The German SS looked down on their Dutch colleagues because they were not men enough to fight at the front and because they distrusted their ideological conviction and loyalty towards the Germans. Indeed, quite a few Dutch SS-members felt sympathy for their confined fellow-countrymen and were willing to help them.

In January 1943 the first male *Schutzhäftlinge* arrived from camp Amersfoort and the first Jewish prisoners from Amsterdam. They entered a camp that was far from finished and lacked basic facilities. The Schutzhäftlingen, who were already worn out by hardship, were forced to help with the completion of the camp under the watchful eye of hard-handed German kapo’s. As a consequence, almost two hundred prisoners died the first months. Poor living conditions also claimed the lives of over one hundred Jewish children and elderly people.

In February 1943 a group of 1800 *Studentengeiseln* entered the camp. They were taken hostage as reprisal for the murder on General Hendrik Seyffardt. As hostages they were treated with more consideration than other prisoners. The SS seldom showed its face and hardly used any violence. Due to this the students were able to maintain their own ‘student culture’. They spend their days playing cards and chess, writing student-like leaflets and debating. Most of them were released after a couple of weeks or months. But some were send to Germany at the end of April 1943 in order to work in the German war industry.

The Jewish prisoners, or ‘detainees’ as they were called at first, were interned in the *Judenauffangslager* and were given the impression that Vught was a labor camp and that they would be allowed to remain in the Netherlands as long as they worked hard in the various industries that were set up in the camp. Furthermore, up to a point the camp leadership allowed the Jewish detainees to manage their own subcamp, wear their own clothes and keep their baggage, all this in order to prevent unrest under the Jewish people.

However, in the spring of 1943 it became more and more clear that the occupying forces had no intention of keeping their promise. An increasing number of Jews were transported to Westerbork and from there deported to the East. By May
1943 the name Auffanglager changed to Durchgangslager and the Jewish ‘detainees’ became ‘prisoners’. They had to hand in their luggage and by the summer of 1943 they had to wear prison clothes, just like the rest of the prisoners. When at the beginning of June 1943 all children under sixteen were deported from Vught it became clear to many that deportation was unavoidable.

With regard to the social stratification of the Jewish camp it was imperative that the Jewish prisoners were confined together with their family and friends. Due to this, the diversity of backgrounds hardly played any role in the social stratification. Relationships were based on ties between family and friends and therefore no new social order was brought about. However, there were tensions caused by the differences in rank between Funktionshäftlingen and ‘ordinary’ prisoners and tensions between German and Dutch Jews and between former employees of Philips Eindhoven, called the SOBU-group, and other prisoner working at the Philips-Kommando.

The way the non-Jewish prisoners perceived their Jewish fellow-prisoners was ambivalent. On the one hand they felt for them and pitied them when they saw them getting ready for deportation. But on the other hand they were annoyed by their helplessness and their servility towards the SS. Because of the impeding deportation Jewish prisoners worked hard and did not dare to offer resistance. Besides that, the internment of the Jews did strengthen the idea that they had to have done something wrong to deserve such a treatment. Therefore, very few non-Jews referred to the injustice of the fate of the Jews.

In May 1943 a group of 77 female Schutzhäftlingen came to camp Vught which marked the opening of the Frauenlager. The women were guarded by Aufseherinnen. These female guards were not members of the SS-battalion, but SS-Gefolge and applied directly at the camp. Reasons for applying were, as with the men, that was a well paid job and their ideological conviction. Besides this, quite a few women were influenced by friendships and relationships they maintained with Dutch and German SS-men and German soldiers.

Apart from political prisoners there were three other groups confined in the women’s camp. First of all ‘asocialen’ and hostages and from the fall of 1943 also Jewish women were incarcerated together with the non-Jewish women. Characteristic of the women’s camp was first of all that despite the differences in background none of the groups were left out. Secondly, the hierarchical structure in the women’s camp
was much less comprehensive than in the Jewish camp or in the male Schutzhaftlager. The female Funktionshäftlinge, mostly elderly housewives, presented themselves more as materfamilias than as leaders. They fulfilled their duties in the way they ran their households: by holding themselves responsible for all women of whom they were in charge. Thirdly, almost no violence was used in the women’s camp. Not only did the Funktionshäftlinge behave nonviolently, but also the Aufseherinnen were moderate in their use of violence. All in all the hierarchical distance between the Aufseherinnen and the female prisoners was relatively small. ‘Normal’ conversations between both groups were possible and the prisoners openly resisted the female guards. The events that led to the infamous bunkerdrama, which claimed the death of ten women, characterized the typical relationship between the Aufseherinnen and the female prisoners.

From May 1943 onwards the conditions of life in the male Schutzhaftlager improved considerably and ‘surviving’ was no longer all that was on their mind. Furthermore, they increasingly succeeded in getting hold of Funktionsstellen at the expense of the German kapo’s. And instead of being an instrument in the hands of the SS like the German kapo’s, the Dutch Funktionshäftlinge were primarily oriented towards their fellow-prisoners and tried to improve conditions of life and to create a certain latitude in regard to the SS. Typical of the male Schutzhaftlager was that the prisoners were not only differentiated by the colored triangle they were given by the SS, so by political prisoners, ‘asocialen’, Jehovah’s Witnesses and hostages, but also by political conviction, socio-economic background and nationality. Although the Funktionshäftlinge came from mixed backgrounds, political prisoners were prominent in the distribution of power amongst the Schutzhäftlinge. They included the hostages and people from the upper classes, but excluded ‘asocialen’ and to a certain extend also foreign prisoners.

The basic outlines of the treatment of the male and female prisoners were the same. Although less violence was used with regard to the women and the Arbeitskommando’s the women were placed in were less exhausting, which resulted in fewer female casualties. The Jewish families mostly maintained the traditional (prewar) family role patrons. Women took care of their men and children, whereas the men tried to safeguard their families from deportation. As for the non-Jewish prisoners, there were female Schutzhäftlinge who took it upon themselves to take care of the male Schutzhäftlinge, but most men adjusted easily to the fact that they
had to perform household work, like cooking, washing and sewing. It is often written that in the male Schutzhaftlager there was an emphasis on practical relations in contrast to the female prisoners who entered into warm friendships. With regard to camp Vught this was not correct. Both male and female prisoners maintained practical as well as warm relations. However, the women called themselves camp sisters and camp mothers and formed surrogate families which the men did not. Furthermore, the men also formed smaller circles of friends. In general both men and women were equally capable in enduring the hardships. Yet, the expectation was that women could not stand up to camp life. That women remained standing led to the consensus that they were generally stronger and more courageous.

In February 1944 Hans Hüttig came to be the third camp commander. Although Hüttig kept himself in the background, he kept a tight rein just as his predecessor Grünewald. Grünewald was arrested as a result of the death of ten women during the dramatic night in the bunker. Unlike Hüttig, Grünewald made his presence very much felt. He kept a strict order in the camp and interfered in every aspect. This was in contrast to the way the first commander Karl Chmielewski had led the camp. Chmielewski hardly showed his face and left the camp in the hands of his Schutzhaftlagerführers Otto Reinecke en Franz Ettlinger. In October 1943 Chmielewski was arrested for objectionable practices.

That the Aufseherinnen were less violent than their male colleagues was not just because women were caring and nonviolent by nature. It resulted from the at that time prevailing ideas about manliness and femininity and the use of violence, combined with the conceptions of the Nazi’s towards the natural role of women. This meant that men and women were given different positions as a result of which women were less required to use violence. The fact that many prisoners still perceived the Aufseherinnen as more brutal than the SS was in line with the idea that women were not supposed to use violence.

In September 1944 camp Vught was evacuated. About 2900 men were transported to Sachsenhausen and 650 women were brought to Ravensbrück. After the war only a handful of German SS-members, but a substantial number of Dutch SS and Aufseherinnen were tried for their activities in camp Vught. Most of the convicted men and women were released early in the early- and mid-fifties.