

Adrian Vanas

Title: *In the Lion's Den: Subverting the Nazis from within Westerbork Transit Camp, 1942-1945.*

Author: Adrian Vanas

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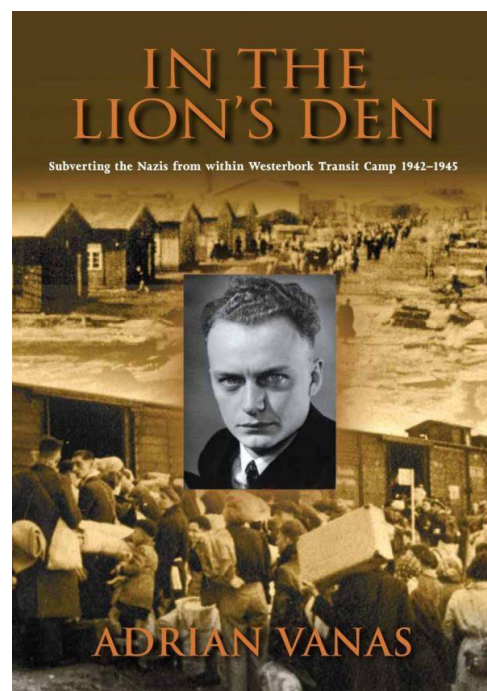
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Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library, Melbourne Holocaust Museum, Sydney Jewish Museum and other public libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Netherlands: Rotterdam, Tweede Exloërmond, Westerbork transit camp; Australia: Sydney.
Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Righteous Gentile; Dutch Resistance



In the Lion's Den is the 179-page memoir of Dutch resistance member Adrian Vanas, who, together with his wife Bertha, helped to rescue more than 1,000 Jews from deportation to the death camps while working at the Westerbork transit camp as the government-appointed head of food distribution. In 1991, the couple were declared Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem for their extraordinary courage and moral integrity.

The memoir opens with a preface by the author, followed by contributions from Dirk Mulder, director of the Westerbork Memorial Centre, and Willy Lindwer, a documentary filmmaker. Pages 1-18 recount the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in 1940, rising antisemitic measures, and the history of Westerbork. Pages 19-82 describe Adrian's arrival at Westerbork in September 1942, daily life within the camp and Dutch resistance activities during 1942-43. Pages 83-111 cover the years 1944-45 and the final deportations from Westerbork. Pages 112-41 recount liberation of Westerbork and the immediate post-war period. Pages 142-79 offer reflections by the author and commentary by the historian and scholar of religion Dr Evan Zuesse.

Adrianus van As (Adrian Vanas) was born in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1919 to Dutch parents and raised in the Christian faith. His extended family lived in Jakarta while Adrian relocated to Rotterdam to study navigation to enable him to join the Dutch merchant navy. While he was there, the Nazis invaded and occupied the Netherlands in May 1940.

Due to his connections with the Dutch colonial administration in Indonesia, Nazi authorities initially sought to arrest him. Adrian went into hiding for six weeks in Tweede

Exloërmond, a small town in the province of Drenthe, before returning to Rotterdam when the threat subsided.

After a failed attempt to escape to Sweden, Adrian secured work with the Municipality of Rotterdam in its food distribution bureau. In 1941 he married Bertha Soerson. As antisemitic measures worsened, the couple became determined to join the resistance, which they did with the help of their neighbour, a Dutch army captain.

After learning of deportations to Westerbork in the summer of 1942, Adrian contacted the resistance and was encouraged to apply for a position at the camp. His application was accepted and in September 1942 he, Bertha, and their infant daughter Hennie, relocated to Westerbork. Shortly after his arrival, a complaint from a German officer led to a month-long imprisonment, but the charges were dropped and he began work as the Deputy Manager of the Food Distribution Centre.

Over the next three years, Adrian and Bertha lived inside the camp with their two young children, navigating the daily horror of transports and constant surveillance. As a Dutch government employee, Adrian was officially responsible for distributing food among the internees, ensuring fair rations and maintaining records. Unofficially, however, he became one of the most effective resistance operatives inside the camp, collaborating with underground groups in nearby Assen, providing false identity papers, coordinating escapes, and removing names from transport lists.

Soon after his appointment in October 1942, deportations to Westerbork from surrounding regions sharply increased and the camp's population swelled. The internees were then sent to "the East", to be murdered in Auschwitz and other camps. Determined to save as many lives as possible, Adrian appointed some thirty Jewish workers to assist him in his office, thereby exempting them from deportation.

In the following months, the pace of deportations left little room for rest. Adrian worked day and night to remove people from transports and secure hiding places, often staying awake for 48 hours at a time. Despite his efforts, trains continued to depart weekly to Nazi extermination camps. By late 1943, Adrian was unable to prevent even his own Jewish staff and friends from being taken.

Though deportations slowed in 1944, conditions in the camp were marked by uncertainty, overcrowding, and shortage of supplies. Adrian's position in Westerbork grew increasingly perilous; he was arrested and interrogated three times on suspicion of black-market activity and involvement in the resistance, but was released for lack of evidence. In mid-1944, he was conscripted for forced labour by the German military – a grave threat both to his own safety and to the remaining Jews who depended on his protection. With assistance from the underground, he underwent a falsified medical examination to be declared unfit for service and remain in Westerbork.

The months following the Allied invasion of Normandy brought increasing danger, as the Nazis launched large-scale operations against the resistance – many of whom were captured and executed – and intensified efforts to round up Jews hiding in the

surrounding Drenthe region. Conditions within Westerbork deteriorated as punitive measures worsened and executions increased. The last transport departed on 15 September 1944, leaving only a few thousand Jews behind, to live in constant fear and deprivation.

In early April 1945, as Allied forces approached the German guards fled the camp. At the request of the remaining Jewish prisoners and the Dutch government-in-exile, Adrian assumed responsibility for the camp's administration, overseeing food, safety, and the repatriation of survivors. The camp was finally liberated on 12 April by Canadian forces. Adrian remained until August 1945. It is estimated that his actions saved over 1,000 lives.

In 1955, the Vanas family emigrated to Australia, living in Sydney. Decades later, their wartime heroism was formally recognised when Adrian and Bertha were honoured as Righteous Among the Nations. From 2000 onwards, Adrian travelled widely throughout Australia with the Courage to Care program, speaking to tens of thousands of students and adults about moral courage, and the dangers of indifference.

In the Lion's Den is an invaluable and detailed witness account of the Westerbork transit camp from September 1942 until liberation. Eloquently written and thoroughly researched, it vividly and meticulously recounts the inner workings and daily life of the camp. Supplemented by frequent excerpts from the author's wartime diaries, the memoir provides not only a careful record of the atrocities committed and the actions of the Nazi administration, but also offers insight into both Dutch and Jewish resistance. The memoir was written and published as part of the Makor Jewish Community's "Write Your Story" Program.