

Translation of "Milly's War Story" -

My grandfather (1869) and father (1893) were diamond workers who earned their living through hard work, as long as there was work available. I am Milly Rubens, born on 11 September 1919 as Milly Schelvis. Since the 1950s I have lived in Melbourne, where I have become the matriarch of quite a large family. I emigrated to Australia because I did not want to risk experiencing again what happened to my family and me during the Second World War. In Amstelveen I have a brother named Jules.

My father worked as a diamond cutter and my grandfather was a grinder of polishing discs. This was not a common profession, and only a few people in Amsterdam practised it. His work consisted of smoothing and levelling round lead discs on which the polishers sharpened their "little stones," as they called them. For this unhealthy work he rented a space in Valkenierstraat, where he brought the discs that had become unusable from polishing. He collected them from the Amsterdam diamond factories, trudging along behind a rickety handcart. After the discs had been re-levelled, he delivered them back again for a payment that was barely enough to support himself.

My father was a diamond sawyer. He had to saw the often-minuscule diamonds into pieces using small round copper toothless circular saws, the edges of which were coated with diamond powder. In good times—which the diamond workers also experienced—this provided a comfortable living.

From my birthplace on Amsterdam's Rapenburg, our family moved several times: via Waverstraat in the South to Retiefstraat in the Transvaal neighborhood. When I had finished the Oranje Vrijstaatschool in 1933, I attended the Antonides School, a secondary school (MULO) on the corner of Roetersstraat and Nieuwe Achtergracht.

After completing that, during a time of severe unemployment, I was allowed to work as an office boy for two guilders fifty per week at the firm De Vries van Buuren on Jodenbreestraat, right next to Rembrandt's House. The back of the building, facing Waterlooplein, was adorned with a gable stone depicting two sheep and the inscription "The Two Innocent Sheep."

There, I had to perform simple tasks on the top floor, where the sewing workshop was located. After some time, I was given more responsible work to do.

At the swimming club De Watervrienden, I met Ruut Rubens from Den Bosch. He was an athlete, played for the local football club BVV in Den Bosch, and was a qualified lifesaver with the local swimming association De Watervrienden. We became engaged in 1939. Because of the increasingly severe measures the occupiers were taking against the Jews, he asked me in 1941 to accompany him on an escape route to Switzerland. I told him I could not accept his offer because I did not want to abandon my parents. He then began the dangerous journey to the land of freedom, where he was well received.

As a descendant of a family of diamond cutters, I became interested in the trade myself. I became a diamond cutter. For this work you only needed a small stick with a tiny diamond attached to the end, with which you had to cut another diamond, fixed in a simple device, into a round shape. The polishers did the rest.

I did this cutting work for several years, while in the evenings, or whenever there was little or no work, I trained myself in repairing fountain pens. I had some understanding of the causes of the problems that could occur and possessed a small box containing the most common spare parts. Repairing and cleaning fountain pens became a welcome addition to my wages as a diamond worker.

One day my fiancé appeared once again at the door of the house in Henriëtte Ronnerstraat, where I was then living with my parents. He could not bear the thought that I was living in the Netherlands, which had become very hostile towards Jews, while he himself was staying in hospitable Switzerland. At great risk to his own life, he had travelled back through occupied France and Belgium to Amsterdam in order to take me with him to neutral Switzerland. But once again I let him leave alone because I did not want to be disloyal to my father and mother.

The war put an end to my work as a diamond cutter and repairer when I arrived at the Vught concentration camp on 23 July 1943, where I was registered as a diamond worker. For unknown reasons my parents were allowed to remain at home. At that time we were still living in Henriëtte Ronnerstraat. In Vught, where I stayed for two months, I did not work in the diamond trade but instead spent several weeks doing simple work for Philips.

At the end of September 1943, I was informed that I would receive an Ausweis (written permission)...to be allowed to return home as a diamond worker. And so it happened. It was an emotional reunion with my parents. The whole street was in an uproar: someone returning from a concentration camp! That did not happen often. After a few days, as a precaution in case I lost it, I decided to take my Ausweis, which I had received on the last day in Vught, to a photography shop so that a copy could be made as quickly as possible. This meant that I had to part with the Ausweis for a short time. I took that risk, never considering — indeed never even thinking — that the very same afternoon a German officer would come to our door to collect our family. Since I obviously could not show my Ausweis, he took me along as well to Amstel Station, where many Jews had already gathered. I told my story to someone from the Jewish Council, who suggested that I accompany him to an SS officer present there, who turned out to be Aus

der Fünten. I briefly explained that I did indeed have an Ausweis but could not show it at that moment. His answer was short and blunt: "Dann haben Sie Pech gehabt" ("Then you have had bad luck").

On 29 September 1943, my father, mother and I arrived in Westerbork. The three of us ended up in barracks 62. It turned out that my brother and his wife had been there four months earlier for six days before being transported to an unknown destination, which proved to be Sobibor.

We remained in Westerbork until 19 May 1944. This relatively long stay was due to my sudden illnesses: diphtheria and scarlet fever. From the Jewish Van Leer family on the Apollolaan, where my father had worked as a servant, we received several food parcels. Once I had recovered, the moment came for my parents and me to be deported further. In passenger carriages we travelled to a large camp near Celle: the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on the Lüneburger Heath. As diamond workers we were assigned to the Sternlager, where we did not have to work. The Germans intended to establish a diamond industry in Bergen-Belsen. Some diamond grinding wheels and circular saws, used for cutting diamonds, had already arrived there from Vught via Westerbork. But there were no diamonds to work on... Our hands were not to run the risk of being damaged. We had to preserve them for the time when Germany would win the war...

In Bergen-Belsen we also received parcels from the Van Leer family. After the war my mother wrote that they had been exceptionally good to us and that we would always remain grateful. I sent postcards to Ruut in Switzerland, which he received. He sent letters and parcels to Bergen-Belsen, but these parcels never reached us.

On 4 December 1944 my father was transferred to the Oranienburg concentration camp. According to a statement from the Dutch Red Cross dated 14 August 1947, he died there toward the end of that month. Under what circumstances we never learned.

My mother and I were transferred on 6 December 1944 to the Beendorf concentration camp, where we had to work in a salt mine. As a form of forced labour we had to assemble parts of aircraft engines. But because there were too few parts and the war was nearing its end, we had to dismantle them again and reassemble them repeatedly. Life in Beendorf was the worst thing we experienced. Many people died from malnutrition and typhus. Mother and I were completely exhausted and emaciated. It could not have lasted much longer. She was skin and bone and many people died from typhus.

I always made sure to stay out of the way of the guards. There was a lot of beating by the female overseers, but you could not always avoid them. In the third week of April we were evacuated because the Americans were approaching. We walked for two days and

slept in barns and in the open air. Many people died along the way. Eventually we ended up in a camp near Hamburg. There we learned of the arrival of the White Buses from Sweden and Denmark. We stayed there for another week and then, on 1 May, crossed the Danish border. Once there, we were deloused, showered, and given clean clothes. It felt wonderful to have clean underwear again. Mother weighed only 68 pounds (31kg) and I weighed 98 pounds. Six weeks later in Sweden we had already recovered considerably.

We remained in Malmö until we had regained sufficient strength. After that we were taken to Gothenburg and housed in small cabins with sixteen people, in the middle of the forest. Some of them I still knew from the Netherlands. We had a pleasant time together there: good food, lots of sweets, and the radio playing. In neutral Sweden we could buy everything at pre-war Dutch prices. After several weeks of eating and treats, our weights had increased to 115 and 128 pounds respectively.

My brother Jules, who had survived eleven camps and was staying in Amsterdam with an aunt by marriage, heard from former neighbours in Henriëtte Ronnerstraat that Mother and I had survived the war. He immediately sent a telegram to Gothenburg, which we received with disbelief. Three survivors from one family! That was something very unusual. We made sure to get on a plane to Amsterdam as quickly as possible. I consider myself excused from describing our reunion.

* According to reports from the Information Bureau of the Netherlands Red Cross dated 7 April 2003, my father was imprisoned in Westerbork camp on 9 July 1943, in barrack 58. My mother followed him a day later, on 10 July, in barrack 60. The reason for this is unknown to me. Both were released again on 17 July. Why remains a mystery.