



Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik,
Gerrit Van Oord,
and Jurjen Wiersma

Reading Ettý Hillesum in Context

Writings, Life, and
Influences of a
Visionary Author

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Preface

The diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum (1914-1943) have a special place among Dutch-Jewish testimonies of the Shoah (Holocaust). They not only contain a valuable account of the Westerbork transition camp during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, they also reflect the spiritual, philosophical, and literary dimensions of Hillesum's important existential search. More than 70 years after her death in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Hillesum's diaries and letters continue to receive worldwide attention and to inspire hundreds of thousands of readers.

In this work, we present a selection of articles originally appearing in Dutch in the nine volume series, *Etty Hillesum Studies*, published by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre. From this series, eighteen articles published since 2003, now translated into English, are included here. Our hope is that through them, researchers worldwide will become acquainted with a representative sample of the ongoing Hillesum research taking place within the Dutch language area.

This volume also includes revised and annotated versions of some of the papers delivered at the Second International Etty Hillesum Congress, organized in January 2014 by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre of Ghent University.

Our special thanks go to Caroline Diepeveen, Mijke van Leersum, Durk van der Meer, Fanny Mojet, Patrick Schetters, Ron van Uum, and Susan Waters for their help in translating the articles, and to Margaret de Boer, John Cartner, Carolyn Coman, and Ms. Michael Strange for editing the English texts. We appreciate very much their dedication to the project.

We are very grateful to Julie Benschop-Plokker, Louise Visser, and Jaap Wagenaar of Amsterdam University Press for their continued support and patience, and to Caroline Diepeveen for making the two indices.

Finally, an important note to the reader: The quotations from Hillesum's writings are taken from *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002). The abbreviation E.T. refers to Arnold J. Pomerans' complete English translation of Hillesum's literary heritage. In the footnotes, the reader will find the original Dutch (or German) text quoted from *Etty Hillesum, Het Werk*, edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik (Amsterdam: Balans, 2012). We hope that this will encourage readers to compare the translation with the original text.

Klaas A.D. Smelik, Gerrit Van Oord and Jurjen Wiersma
15 August 2017

Introduction

After the publication of *Het Verstoorde Leven* [An Interrupted Life] in 1981, scholars around the world evinced a keen interest in the writings of Etty Hillesum. That volume – the first compilation of sections of Etty Hillesum’s diaries and letters – gave rise to an extensive examination of Hillesum’s written legacy. Her work became a distinct field of international research within the Humanities, and a new domain in the field of Holocaust studies. Academic interest in Etty Hillesum’s work was internationalized in a significantly short time span. By 1988, the first international seminar on Etty Hillesum was held, not in the Netherlands where she was born, but rather in Rome, demonstrating the breadth of her appeal.

In the early days, researchers had no other resource for their work but *Het Verstoorde Leven*, in the original Dutch version, or in translation. This had a rather unfavourable impact on the quality of research, since the diary entries and letters selected for that book gave a distorted view of Etty Hillesum and her writings. A complete, academic edition was in order. This task fell to Klaas A.D. Smelik and his staff at the Etty Hillesum Foundation in Amsterdam, which published the first edition of Hillesum’s complete works in 1986.

The objective in publishing the critical 1986 edition was to offer a text that would form a solid basis for further research. It is extremely important, therefore, that English, French, and Italian translations of the complete edition, including all annotations, have become available since – while a German edition is in preparation.

Still, it has remained difficult for scholars who do not know Dutch to investigate Etty Hillesum’s writings. Many of the existing translations are imprecise, and the English rendering is considered particularly weak. In response, in 2014, the Etty Hillesum Research Centre published a new, bilingual edition of Hillesum’s diaries and letters (Dutch-English), to enable non-Dutch scholars to consult the original texts with far greater ease and to extract meaning with greater precision.

Standing apart from Hillesum’s own work, however, yet nevertheless of great potential interest to scholars, are important studies on Etty Hillesum written in Dutch, and thus inaccessible to non-Dutch speakers. One might mention, for example, Piet Schrijvers’ essay, “Etty Hillesum in joodse contexten” [Etty Hillesum in Jewish Contexts], which was published in Dutch in 2003. In this article, the author clearly shows that Etty Hillesum is rooted in Judaism – a contentious issue from the beginning of the reception

of Hillesum's writings. The international discussion about whether or not Etty Hillesum should be considered a Jewish author, would have benefited greatly if this article had been available to readers outside the Dutch language area. Indeed, much of the discussion would have been superfluous.

Schrijvers' article appeared in the first volume of the Dutch-language series, *Etty Hillesum Studies* published by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre, and since 2003, the Centre has issued eight additional volumes. The staff at the Centre now feels the time has come to publish in English a selection of articles from this series in order to acquaint researchers worldwide with their content. The selections in the current volume are – as much as possible – a representative sample of research on Etty Hillesum within the Dutch language area. In total, eighteen contributions from the *Etty Hillesum Studies* series, translated into English, are included. They represent Dutch research on Etty Hillesum, and also demonstrate how research in the Netherlands fits into the global effort to understand Hillesum's written legacy.

In 2014, at Ghent University, the Second International Etty Hillesum Conference took place. Many of the conference presentations were published in the volume, *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* [Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 28] (Leiden & Boston, MA: Brill, 2017). Seven conference papers *not* in that volume, are included here.

The present volume opens with a short biography of Etty Hillesum by Klaas A.D. Smelik. In it, Smelik presents an overview of what is presently known about Hillesum's life. The biography is followed by the first section, which is devoted to the diaries.

Klaas A.D. Smelik, in his contribution, "To Remember Is to Act: From a Bundle of Notebooks to a Worldwide Publication", writes about the publication history of Hillesum's written legacy. The story charts Hillesum's close link to Smelik's parental home, up through his own work to get various editions translated and published. The history of these accomplishments is rather complicated, but it is nevertheless clearly elucidated here.

In her article, "*Hineinhorchen* and Writing: The Language Use of Etty Hillesum", Marja Clement poses the question: What are the characteristics of Etty Hillesum's language use? Although an extensive study is needed in order to describe the language use of Etty Hillesum in all its details, Clement's article offers a useful introduction by engaging with many quotations from the diaries. This preliminary research leads to the following conclusion: Etty Hillesum's work is rich in figurative language, including

metaphors and metonyms, subtle humour and irony, and is characterized by an original and unique style.

The next section of the volume deals with war and persecution. Essential to the aura of holiness ascribed to Etty Hillesum by some of her readers, was her choice to share the destiny of her people. Her choice is seen as a sacrifice by some, although Etty Hillesum herself did not use this term in this regard. Has she deliberately chosen death or did she feel that she would survive “Poland” too? Was Etty Hillesum fully aware of what would happen when she refused to hide? Opinions on this issue are divided. In his paper, “Etty Hillesum’s Choice Not to Go into Hiding”, Klaas A.D. Smelik adds clarity to this controversy by re-analyzing the available data. He concludes that some of Etty Hillesum’s critics have not read her texts correctly, while the martyr’s role that others have attributed to her needs relativization as well.

In her essay “Agency within Nazi Constraints: Etty Hillesum and Her Interpretation of the Jewish Fate”, Lotte Bergen takes the concept of “agency” as her starting point. The term agency, derived from sociology, refers to the freedom of people under limited circumstances. In this case, Bergen is dealing with the agency of the Jewish people during the Shoah. She asks if Etty Hillesum managed to achieve freedom of action for herself in her difficult situation. She distinguishes between Hillesum’s “inner-felt agency”, her choice to relate to the persecution in a certain way, and her “outer agency”, referring to Hillesum’s decision to work for the Jewish Council, as well as her request to be transferred to Camp Westerbork, and her decision to return to the camp after each period of leave. Bergen’s conclusion is that, in the face of Nazi horrors increasingly taking hold of Jewish lives, Etty Hillesum was able not only to experience life as beautiful and meaningful, but within the constraints imposed on Jews by the occupying power, she was able to take control of her fate. Her attitude towards the persecution of Jews and her voluntary choice to go to Camp Westerbork show – according to Bergen – Hillesum’s courage to determine her own course and become the chronicler of her time.

Camp Westerbork is the focus of Jurjen Wiersma’s paper, “One Ought to Write a Chronicle of Westerbork”. Westerbork was an unimaginable as well as exceptional concentration camp. Within its confines, various realities existed for inmates that could not be captured with a single narrative. It was “a world of its own”. On a summer evening in 1942, while eating in a dining barrack, Etty Hillesum was inspired to murmur, “One ought to write a chronicle of Westerbork.” The man eating next to her replied, “Yes, but to do that one would have to be a great poet.” Etty Hillesum agreed. Of course, she had already been writing about camp life in her diaries and

letters, producing a unique and wonderful constellation of “testimonials”. She was a teller of truths about the camp, but not (yet) a chronicler, a form that she felt had different requirements. In Wiersma’s essay, an effort is made to add crucial elements taken from the doctoral theses of two young Dutch historians, Eva Moraal and Marieke Meeuwenoord. Taken together, Wiersma, Moraal, and Meeuwenoord achieve a type of mosaic that can be characterized as a chronicle of Westerbork. The essay truly captures the plight and predicament of Camp Westerbork inmates, who included in their number Etty Hillesum herself.

In his contribution, “The Departure: A Reconstruction of the Unexpected Deportation of the Hillesum Family from Camp Westerbork on Tuesday, 7 September 1943”, Gerrit Van Oord spotlights the diary of Philip Mechanicus. Van Oord puts Mechanicus’ diary under a magnifying glass as it tells the story of the deportation of the Hillesum family from Camp Westerbork. After analyzing the Mechanicus text, and using various sources, including some letters from Hillesum’s environment unknown until now, Van Oord reconstructs the course of events that led to the unexpected, yet inevitable departure of four out of five members of the Hillesum family. Van Oord criticizes a number of assumptions about this departure. For example, he considers the well-worn testimony of Benno Stokvis unreliable, and attributes a greater power over the lives of the inmates of the camp to *Sachbearbeiterin* Gertrud Slotke than is usually recognized. In this way, he arrives at a thesis about the departure of the Hillesum family different from the prevailing one that places responsibility on mother Rebecca (Riva) Hillesum and her letter to *Generalkommissar* Rauter requesting more freedom of movement. In that narrative, Rauter ignites in anger at the presumptuous request of a Jewess, and issues a deportation order immediately. Van Oord believes, however, that this interpretation is untenable, and his essay invites the reader to take a fresh view on the matter.

The theme of the third section of this book is reading and writers. In his article “Aesthetic Mirrors: Etty Hillesum and Rainer Maria Rilke”, Meins G.S. Coetsier analyzes Etty Hillesum’s intellectual engagement with the literary works of the Prague-born German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). Coetsier offers the reader a glimpse into one of the most powerful, yet underrated influences on Etty Hillesum’s development as a writer. Coetsier does justice to the profundity of Hillesum’s insight into Rilke’s writings, and discloses some of the literary subtleties shared by Hillesum and Rilke. Coetsier draws three lines from Hillesum’s work to Rilke’s – gazing into three “aesthetic mirrors”: (a) “I am with you” [*Ichbinbeidir*]; (b) “God matures” [*Gott reift*]; and (c) “patience is all” [*Geduld ist alles*]. In addition, the

article claims that the works of Rilke and Hillesum are relevant today, and that war, terror, and genocide are bloody wounds still in need of “a balm”, and, where possible, a way to heal them. From this perspective, Coetsier’s scholarly contribution reveals that Rilke’s influence on Hillesum’s writings were displayed not only in her poetic quality, but also in her real and lived humanity, and in the unmatched grace and intelligence with which she met challenges. Rarely did two people write so much in such short life spans. How war, but also love, left their marks on the lives and writings of these two authors remains the mystery of what Rilke calls: *Weltinnenraum*.

In addition to Rilke, Carl Gustav Jung carried a special place of influence in Ety Hillesum’s oeuvre. After all, he had been Spier’s teacher and close associate, and Spier had taught Hillesum. In her article, “‘I Keep Being Drawn towards Jung’: Good and Evil in the Work of Ety Hillesum and Carl Gustav Jung”, Janny van der Molen demonstrates how Jung and Hillesum differ from one another, but also how close their thoughts were on questions of evil. For both, the question of evil was crucial to their philosophy of life, and they both conceived of evil in a way that deviated from the spirit of their time. Most intellectuals saw good and evil as consistently opposed to one another, representing one’s own good and the opponent’s evil. Today, at the beginning of the third millennium, we see that the contradiction between “good guys” and “bad guys” is once more determining our thinking. This makes understanding the connection between Jung and Hillesum all the more relevant.

Walther Rathenau (1867-1922) was a socially successful, prominent Jewish politician and German statesman, a courageous and tenacious personality, who remained standing in a chaotic and hostile world. Lore Karrenbrock (1895-1928) grew up in Essen. She began reading the works of Rathenau in the autumn of 1917. Subsequently, she wrote letters to *him* and when the author kindly replied, a loving relationship flowered between them, albeit platonic in nature. The love of the much younger Karrenbrock was, however, of a somewhat self-destructive nature. She wanted to exist solely for him. Having read Rathenau’s letters to Karrenbrock, Ety Hillesum became intrigued by the drama in this love affair and commented upon it. In his contribution, “‘To Realize That Life Is Truly Simple’: Ety Hillesum and Walther Rathenau”, Jurjen Wiersma depicts Ety Hillesum as the central figure in a triptych flanked by Rathenau and Karrenbrock. In this setting, we see three human beings brought together in dark times, facing complexities and extremes. In Hillesum’s reflections upon the delicate position of Rathenau and Karrenbrock, she makes up her mind. More important than life, suffering, or love, is simplicity, she confirms. This she feels she has

learned from Rathenau who said, “For me there will never be a happier moment, than to realize that life is truly simple.”

The subject of the fourth section of this book is family and friends. One of Etty Hillesum’s friends was the author Klaas Smelik Senior (1897-1986), to whom she entrusted her diaries. In his contribution “Romance Down by the River IJssel: The First Meeting between Etty Hillesum and Klaas Smelik Senior”, Smelik’s son, Klaas A.D. Smelik, looks to clarify the course of events during the first encounter between Etty Hillesum and father Smelik. A dedication written in a book, which Etty Hillesum gave to Klaas Smelik Senior and his second wife Mien, provides the basis for an analysis. The Hillesum/Smelik meeting was a notable one that would become even more meaningful as time went on.

When Etty Hillesum had her hands analyzed by the psychochirologist, Julius Spier, on 3 February 1941, she was deeply impressed. After an examination of the form of her hand and palm, Spier told her what he understood of her personality and the issues plaguing her. Soon after, Hillesum enrolled in Spier’s course on Psychochirology in order to learn how to analyze hands. Until Hillesum began working at the Jewish Council, she spent a substantial amount of time engaged in reading hands. In her article, “Etty Hillesum, A Devoted Student of Julius Spier”, Alexandra Nagel highlights a series of moments in which Hillesum followed Spier’s footsteps and sought to become a hand-reading psychological therapist herself.

We get “a new perspective” on the relationship between Hillesum and Spier in the contribution of Alexandra Nagel and Denise de Costa, entitled, “‘With You, I Have My Anchorage’: Fifteen Letters from Etty Hillesum to Julius Spier”. The authors provide an overview of the Hillesum/Spier bond gleaned from “placing the texts in chronological order” and checking the letters against entries in Hillesum’s diary. A key letter not yet included in the complete edition of Etty Hillesum’s work was only discovered in December of 2012. This typed, unsigned sheet of paper, found in a folder in the archive of publisher Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, highlights Hillesum’s interest in psychotherapy. Here, we also notice the gentle ribbing Hillesum gives Spier (“I must run, I have a course with a madman”), revealing just how much in love with him she was. These letters to Spier are written in German rather than Dutch and a close look shows that she put quite a bit of effort into composing them. Moreover, in these letters, Hillesum’s thoughts and feelings on a variety of subjects are formulated with an utterly open and honest frame of mind.

Etty Hillesum and Julius Spier did not live together in Amsterdam. Nevertheless, they were in constant, lively contact with one another, calling each

other, meeting often, and writing letters. Indeed, the first diary notebook starts with a letter Hillesum wrote to Spier. During the summer holiday of 1941, Hillesum and Spier maintained an especially intense correspondence. A letter Spier sent to Hillesum resurfaced in December 2012, and it is this letter that Ria van den Brandt and Alexandra Nagel utilize in their paper, “Three Times Yes and a Thousand Fold No! Julius Spier Writes to Etty Hillesum”. The letter gives the reader a new glimpse into the unique relationship of the two. In it, the teacher/therapist Spier responds constructively to an issue Hillesum had brought to the fore and advises her to read a passage in Rittelmeyer’s *Briefe über das Johannes-Evangelium*. Moreover, the letter expresses Spier’s very personal, private feelings of affection and desire for Etty Hillesum and may hold a clue to the controversy about whether or not they were lovers.

The subject of the fifth and final section of this volume has to do with the reception of Hillesum’s diaries and letters. This section starts with the already mentioned article, “Etty Hillesum in Jewish Contexts”, by Piet Schrijvers. In this essay, a modern demographic survey of Dutch Jews from the year 2000 is utilized to reflect upon the Jewish character of Etty Hillesum’s life and writings. Her writings show a marked development away from assimilation, to a clear awareness of her Jewishness. In this, she was influenced by German Jews who had immigrated to Holland, and, of course, by the actual persecution of the Dutch Jews beginning mid-1942 (Diaries, notebook IX). Etty Hillesum’s concentration on her own spiritual life is comparable to the German concepts of *Innere Emigration* and *Innerlichkeit*. Schrijvers highlights other aspects of Etty Hillesum’s Jewish identity when he points to her obsession with language and text (literature as a second homeland), her self-imposed role of historical writer, and her dialogues with God. Post-war Jewish reactions to Etty Hillesum’s diaries were inevitably mixed given her controversial attitude to armed resistance, heroism, and her acceptance of the so-called collective fate of the Jews (*Massenschicksal*).

When Etty Hillesum started her work for the *Joodse Raad* [Jewish Council], she did so in the hope of avoiding deportation. In this way, she initially stood separate from the Jewish community and its fate. Her role meant complying with the Council’s dubious policy of assisting with deportations, evading the warning of Jews, preventing them (and herself) from hiding, and neither resisting, nor escaping the Nazi ordeal. In “From Separation to Communitas: Etty Hillesum, A Jewish Perspective”, Thalia Gur-Klein discusses Hillesum’s choice to volunteer with the Jewish Council as a social worker in Camp Westerbork in light of concepts and debates presented in Biblical and Talmudic ethics, and in Jewish mysticism. Gur-Klein considers

Hillesum's choice as an example of *communitas*, and sees her decision not as a separation, but rather as a renewal of empathy with the Jewish people, their fate, heritage, and covenant with God. Gur-Klein points out that the classical ethical texts hypothesize the exact moral dilemma Hillesum faced: separating from one's fellow human beings to save one's own life, or conversely, sharing a lethal collective fate because of love of others. Both choices are acceptable. Having situated Etty Hillesum within *communitas*, the second part of the article proceeds by invoking the mystical Judaism of Kabbalah and Hasidism, and focusing on the role of the *zaddik* – a righteous and God-inspired person, regarded holy in Judaism. Here, the author asserts that, through her choice of *communitas* with fellow camp inmates, Etty Hillesum rose to the role of a female *zaddik*.

In writing his essay, "The Invincible Hope of Christian de Chergé and Etty Hillesum", Yves Bériault makes the leap to another religious tradition. Etty Hillesum and Christian de Chergé of the Tibhirine Monastery in Algeria, shared a belief that God requires our help in this world and that He places His hope on us. Through their writings, Etty Hillesum and Christian de Chergé laid the foundation for a theology of hope. They embraced the concept of a God who asks of humans that they accompany Him to the margins of human existence and stand in solidarity with the many who are discarded. In this theology, humans are seen as the bearers of the message of hope, and builders of a better world. They are to act as witnesses to the greatness of human life wherever that life is violated.

In her article "Etty Hillesum: Gender, the Modern and the Literature of the Holocaust", Mary Evans points to a paradox. Etty Hillesum's diaries and letters, products of the Second World War, were written in a century that was widely assumed to be "modern", a world in which the legacy of the European Enlightenment would be manifested in rational and liberal policies. Amongst those policies would be the greater social and intellectual emancipation of women. Yet, Etty Hillesum – educated and with a liberated mind – was the victim of European fascism set on crushing all forms of political dissent and the Jewish people and their religion. The work of Etty Hillesum is like a fulcrum in this twentieth-century rupture. Etty Hillesum experienced education and untold forms of personal freedom and then pivoted to use these intellectual riches to document the murderous policies of the Holocaust. From Etty Hillesum's accounts of the persecution of Dutch Jews, we get a detailed chronicle of the ways in which the capacity for the rational was used not to emancipate, but to kill. The promise of human progress so closely associated with the Enlightenment was shown to be a very broken promise.

In his contribution “America in the Shade: Etty Hillesum as Mediator between Cold-War Perspectives on the Holocaust”, Hans Krabbendam draws our attention to the United States. He points out that Etty Hillesum hardly referred to the United States at all in her writing and yet, this country played an important role in the perception of her work. Krabbendam details three levels of influence involving the US and summarizes their functional impact. First, the fact that Hillesum wrote so little on the US encourages researchers to re-evaluate the expectations placed on America in occupied Europe during the war. Second, American reflections on Hillesum’s work focused on the psychological dimension of her work, and obscured the cultural context of her writings. Finally, Krabbendam sees Hillesum’s fascination with Russia as a welcome bridge between diverse approaches to the Holocaust articulated in the Soviet Union and the United States. By avoiding the fixed models that were the result of Cold War historiography, Etty Hillesum inhabits the role of mediator, a role that perfectly matches her aspirations as a writer.

Etty Hillesum paid little attention to the United States, but was captivated by Japanese culture. In turn, Japanese readers of Etty Hillesum’s diaries have responded with appreciable depth to her work. In her article “Perceptions of Etty Hillesum in Japan”, Yukiko Yokohata points to an intriguing difference that exists between Buddhist and Roman Catholic readers in Japan when they encounter Etty Hillesum’s diaries. In Yokohata’s view, the Buddhist context corresponds more closely to Hillesum’s core thinking than does the Roman Catholic perspective, which hews closer to views on Hillesum found in Europe. Etty Hillesum’s fascination with Japanese art appears to have been more than just an aesthetic experience. It was a relationship emerging from Hillesum’s essence, and one that gave rise to the close identity between her work and Japan’s Buddhist tradition.

In her paper, “Thinker, Poet, Cyber Phenomenon, or Saint: Etty Hillesum in Portugal”, Patricia Couto discusses the reception of Etty Hillesum’s *Diário* [Diary], and *Cartas* [Letters] published in Portuguese in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Couto demonstrates how a Roman Catholic readership appropriated Hillesum as their own in the predominantly Roman Catholic country. This was due, in part, to the source text for the translation, *Het Verstoorde Leven* [An Interrupted Life], which was compiled by Jan Geurt Gaarlandt to emphasize the spiritual aspects in Hillesum’s writing while compromising the historical, philological, and material elements. In spite of this, one can still discern a secondary, less religious current in the Portuguese reception of Hillesum’s work, one motivated by a more philosophical and feminist perspective. Until today in Portugal, interest in Etty Hillesum’s

work is broadening. It has been discussed at universities, been the subject of various dissertations, and has inspired a generation of young Portuguese novelists.

In her contribution “Bright Orange and Crimson: How a Dutch Dissertation on Etty Hillesum Was Coloured by French Philosophy”, Denise de Costa addresses the complexity and ambiguity of Hillesum’s work. De Costa explains how her thinking about Etty Hillesum was shaped by a women’s studies perspective, and fed by French postmodern philosophers like François Lyotard and Hélène Cixous.

The chapter that Ulrich Beck dedicates to Etty Hillesum in his book *Der eigene Gott* has played an important role in the reception of Etty Hillesum’s work. Nevertheless, there are lingering doubts about Beck’s rendering of Hillesum’s image of God. Klaas A.D. Smelik investigates Beck’s vision in his essay, “Ulrich Beck and Etty Hillesum”. According to Smelik, it appears that Beck was fascinated by Etty Hillesum and her image of God, and he felt a strong affinity with her. Smelik points out, however, that having an affinity with someone does not create a sufficient basis for analysis, and he criticizes Beck for not examining Hillesum’s texts carefully enough to understand what Etty Hillesum really meant in her writing about God.

In his paper “Loving-kindness, Hatred, and Moral Indignation: Etty Hillesum and Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Ordo amoris*”, Ronald Commers clarifies Etty Hillesum’s views on the ethical meaning of mercy and pardon in extreme situations, and Vladimir Jankélévitch’s philosophical stance on forgiveness and its limits. According to Commers, Jankélévitch argues that the “suspension of pardon” is crucial and is no less than a moral imperative. Etty Hillesum meanwhile, places loving-kindness and the absence of hatred at the core of morality. Are these views not contradictory? The study of pardon and forgiveness under extreme conditions of terror, persecution, and organized genocide is significant. Commers takes what seems to be a moral quandary, and, giving a closer look at Jankélévitch’s writings and Hillesum’s diaries, posits that the differences between the two authors are not as contradictory as they at first appear.

In the final contribution in the volume, “A Woman’s All-Embracing Search of the ‘Other’: Etty Hillesum as the Basis of a ‘Pedagogy of Care and Attention’”, Anna Aluffi Pentini introduces Hillesum’s words “hardy but not hard”. Aluffi Pentini maintains that these words – for her, the core of Hillesum’s writing and living – can act as a guiding maxim in the science of pedagogy. Making a distinction between the designations “hardy” and “hard”, is absolutely essential in the education of social professionals, and is at the heart of any process that requires resilience. But is resilience

essentially female? Several testimonies that emerged from the concentration camps seem to confirm that it is. Etty Hillesum, Milena Jesenská, and Helen Lewis all conveyed a type of female hope characterized by vitality and tenderness. The dialogical dimension of their lives was not merely historical testimony about tragic events, but also a hymn to life itself, a mental disposition to both engage and remain serene from the confinement of the camps. At the very ends of their lives, for example, these women consciously chose to pay attention to the smallest details, such as the colour of flowers. Today, educational work demands competencies built upon tender and careful attention to people and things. Etty Hillesum, so vividly described in her diaries and letters, can teach us how to cope; her very being clarifies the distinction between hardy and hard.

The 26 contributions in the present volume fulfil the aims of its publication. By making the essays available, we have demonstrated the diversity of research being done especially in the Dutch speaking countries, but also on an international scale to probe the depths of Etty Hillesum's writings. And we have pointed to the enormous potential for future research as well. Etty Hillesum's life was ended so abruptly by the very hatred that she fought against so passionately. Her cruel death stresses the importance of reading and rereading her words against enmity, as the unthinkable can always resurface in the realm of human interaction. Etty Hillesum may hold a key against just such a possibility:

I see no alternative: each of us must turn inward and destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others.

1 **A Short Biography of Etty Hillesum (1914-1943)**

Klaas A.D. Smelik

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Abstract

In this introductory contribution, the author presents an overview of what is currently known about Etty Hillesum's life, study, family, and friends.

Keywords: biography, Julius Spier, Camp Westerbork, literary legacy, Etty Hillesum, Hillesum family, diaries and letters

Esther (Etty) Hillesum was born on 15 January 1914 in her parents' home at Molenwater 77 in Middelburg, the capital of Zeeland, where her father Levie (Louis) Hillesum had been teaching classical languages (Greek and Latin) since 1911. In Amsterdam, on 7 December 1912, he had married Etty's mother, Riva (Rebecca) Bernstein, who went with him to Middelburg. Etty's father was born in Amsterdam on 25 May 1880, to the merchant Jacob Samuel Hillesum and his wife Esther Hillesum-Loeza; Etty, therefore, was named after her paternal grandmother. The family lived at the time at Sint Antoniesbreestraat 31, Amsterdam. Louis Hillesum studied classical languages at the University of Amsterdam. In 1902, he took his bachelor's, followed in 1905 by his master's (both degrees *cum laude*). On 10 July 1908, he defended his thesis *De imperfecti et aoristi usu Thucydidis* (also awarded *cum laude*).

Middelburg was his first teaching assignment. In 1914, he began teaching classical languages at the Hilversum Gymnasium [Grammar School], but, due to deafness in one ear and impaired vision, had trouble maintaining order in the large classes at that institution. That is why, in 1916, he moved to the smaller Gymnasium in the town of Tiel in the middle of the Netherlands. In 1918, he became teacher of classics and deputy headmaster in Winschoten in the north-eastern part of the Netherlands. In 1924, he was appointed to

similar positions at the Gymnasium in Deventer, where he became headmaster [Dutch: *rector*] on 1 February 1928. He remained there until his forced dismissal on 29 November 1940, at the request of the German occupier.

Louis Hillesum has been described as a small, quiet and unobtrusive man, a stoic, scholarly recluse with a great deal of humour and erudition. In the lower forms, he had at first experienced serious difficulties maintaining order and in response became an extremely strict teacher. In the higher forms, however, he came into his own. Although interested in Judaism, Louis Hillesum was highly assimilated; he worked, for example, on Saturdays. In Deventer, he was among the city's leading citizens, and even in Camp Westerbork he maintained these contacts and his cultural interests.

His wife Riva was born to Michael Bernstein and Hinde Lipowsky on 23 June 1881 in Pochev (Russia). Following a pogrom, she was the first person in her family to leave Surazh (Chernigol) and come to Amsterdam on 18 February 1907. She moved in with the Montagnu family, at number 21 on the Tweede Jan Steenstraat. Her profession at that time was recorded as Russian-language teacher. On 29 May of that same year, her younger brother Jacob, a diamond cutter, followed, and moved in with the Montagnu family as well. On 10 June 1907, her parents arrived in Amsterdam from Surazh. They moved into the second floor of the house on the Tweede Jan Steenstraat. On 9 January 1913, Jacob married Marie Mirkin, who had come from Warsaw to Amsterdam on 5 May 1913. Their daughter Rahel Sarra was born on 19 October of that year. Shortly afterwards, the entire family emigrated illegally to the United States; only Riva remained behind with Louis Hillesum, to whom she had been married on 7 December 1912.

Riva Hillesum-Bernstein has been characterized as lively, chaotic, extroverted, and dominant. Ety's relationship with her mother was a difficult one in the early years, but apparently improved while they were at Camp Westerbork. In addition to Ety, Riva Hillesum bore two more children: Jacob (Jaap), born in Hilversum on 27 January 1916 and named after Louis' father, and Michael (Mischa), named after Riva's father.

Jaap Hillesum completed the Gymnasium in 1933. He went on to study medicine, first at the University of Amsterdam and later at Leiden University. He was intelligent, wrote poems, and was attractive to women. Mentally, he was unstable: he was committed to psychiatric hospitals on several occasions. During the war, he worked as an intern at the *Nederlandsch-Israelietisch Ziekenhuis* (Jewish hospital) in Amsterdam.

Mischa Hillesum was born on 22 September 1920 in Winschoten. Even as a child, he exhibited striking musical talent. In 1931, he moved to Amsterdam, where he attended the famous Vossius Gymnasium for three years

and spent the rest of his time studying piano. His mentor was the famous Dutch pianist George van Renesse (1909-1994). Around 1939, he was committed to *Het Apeldoornsche Bos* (at that time the Jewish mental asylum in the Netherlands) and treated for schizophrenia. Even after his release, he continued to be extremely unstable. Mischa was not only an accomplished pianist, he also composed music (his compositions have been preserved).

Youth and study

Etty Hillesum spent her childhood years in Middelburg, Hilversum (1914-1916), Tiel (1916-1918), Winschoten (1918-1924), and Deventer, from July 1924 on, where she entered the fifth form of the Graaf van Burenschool. The family lived at number 51 on the A.J. Duymaer van Twiststraat (currently number 2). Later (in 1933), they moved to the Geert Grootestraat 9, but, by then, ETTY was no longer living at home. After primary school, ETTY Hillesum attended the Gymnasium in Deventer, where her father was deputy headmaster. Unlike her younger brother Jaap, who was an extremely gifted pupil, ETTY's marks were not particularly high. At school, she also studied Hebrew, and for a time she attended the meetings of a Zionist young people's group in Deventer.

After completing her school years, she went to Amsterdam to study law. She took lodgings with the Horowitz family, at the Ruysdaelstraat 32¹, where her brother Mischa had been staying since July of 1931. Six months later, she moved to the Apollolaan 29, where her brother Jaap had been living since September 1933 while he was studying medicine. In November 1933, Jaap moved to the Jan Willem Brouwerstraat 22^{house}; ETTY followed one month later. In September 1934, ETTY's name once again appeared in the registry at Deventer. On 6 June 1935, she took her bachelor's exams at the University of Amsterdam. At that time, she was living with her brother Jaap at Keizersgracht 612^c. In March of 1937, she took a room in the house of the accountant Hendrik (Han) J. Wegerif, at Gabriël Metsustraat 6¹, an address also officially registered as the residence of her brother Jaap from October 1936 to September 1937. Wegerif, a widower, asked ETTY Hillesum to take care of the household, but they also began an affair. It was in this house so dear to her that ETTY Hillesum lived until her definitive departure for Camp Westerbork in June 1943.

Not much is known about ETTY Hillesum's university years. She travelled in left-wing, anti-fascist student circles, and was politically and socially aware without belonging to a political party. After the publication of

her diaries, her acquaintances from this period were amazed to learn of Etty Hillesum's spiritual development during the war years, a period in which she clearly adopted different interests and a different circle of friends, although she did maintain a number of her pre-war contacts. Etty Hillesum took her master's exams in Dutch Law (public law in particular) on 23 June and 4 July of 1939. Her academic results were not striking. In addition, she studied Slavic languages at Amsterdam and Leiden, but the German occupation prevented her from completing this study with an exam. She did, however, continue to study Russian language and literature until the very end, and also gave lessons in these subjects. She taught a course at the Volksuniversiteit [Open University] and later gave private lessons until her definitive departure to Camp Westerbork. When she was deported to Poland, she had in her rucksack a bible and a Russian grammar.

Julius Spier

The diaries were written largely in her room on the Gabriël Metsustraat, where not only she and Wegerif, but also Wegerif's son, Hans, the German housekeeper Käthe Fransen, and a chemistry student by the name of Bernard Meylink were living. It was through Bernard that, on Monday, 3 February 1941, Etty went to serve as "model" for the psychochirologist Julius Spier, at the Courbetstraat 27 in Amsterdam.

Spier (who is almost always referred to in the diaries as 'S.') was born in Frankfurt am Main in 1887, the sixth of seven children. At the age of fourteen, he was apprenticed to the Beer Sontheimer trading firm. There he succeeded in working his way up to a managerial position. His original ambition of becoming a singer was foiled by an illness that left him hard of hearing. Spier enjoyed moving in artistic circles and set up his own publishing house, by the name of *Iris*.

In addition, from 1904 on, he had a pronounced interest in chirolgy. Following his 25th jubilee at Beer Sontheimer in 1927, Spier withdrew from business life to dedicate himself to the study of chirolgy. He underwent instructive analysis with C.G. Jung in Zurich, and at Jung's recommendation opened a practice in 1929 as psychochirologist in Berlin. The practice there was rather successful. Spier also taught courses.

In 1935, he divorced his wife, Hedl (Hedwig) Rocco, to whom he had been married since 1917, and left the two children, Ruth and Wolfgang, with her. He hired two rooms on the Aschaffenburgstrasse, where he had

his practice from then on. He had a number of affairs, but finally became engaged to his pupil, Hertha Levi, who emigrated to London in 1937 or 1938. Spier also left Nazi Germany, and came as a legal immigrant to Amsterdam in early 1939. After first living with his sister on the Muzenplein, and later in a room on the Scheldestraat, from late 1940 on, he rented two rooms from the Nethe family at the Courbetstraat 27 in Amsterdam-South. There he also set up practice and taught courses.

The students at those courses and their friends invited “models” whose hands Spier analyzed by way of practical example. Gera Bongers, the sister of Bernard Meylink’s fiancée Loes, was one of Spier’s students, and it was through Bernard Meylink that Etty Hillesum was invited to have her hands analyzed during a Monday evening class. This fairly chance encounter proved formative for the course of Etty Hillesum’s life. She was immediately impressed by Spier’s personality, and decided to go into therapy with him.

On 8 March 1941, she drafted a letter to Spier in an exercise book. The next day, she began on her diary, probably on Spier’s advice and as part of her therapy. Little wonder, then, that the relationship with Spier was a major theme in her diaries. For Etty Hillesum, however, keeping a diary was useful for more than therapy alone; it also fit well with her literary ambitions. She wanted to become a writer and her diaries could later provide material for a novel, for example. In this context, it is worth noting that some of her letters contain quotes from her diary. Moreover, she hoped in this way to find a way of describing her thoughts and feelings in a literary manner. That proved not to be easy, but gradually she developed her own style of writing and gained confidence in her abilities.

Although his patient, Hillesum also became Spier’s secretary and friend. Because Spier wished to remain faithful to Hertha Levi, and because Etty Hillesum already had a relationship with Han Wegerif, a certain distance was always present in the relationship between Hillesum and Spier, despite its importance to both. Spier had a very great influence on Etty Hillesum’s spiritual development; he taught her how to deal with her depressive and egocentric bent, and introduced her to the Bible and St. Augustine. Etty Hillesum had been reading other authors, such as Rilke and Dostoevsky, since her schooldays, but under Spier’s influence their work also took on deeper meaning for her. With the passage of time, the relationship with Spier assumed a less central position in Etty Hillesum’s life. When he died on 15 September 1942, she had developed enough to be able to assimilate his death with a certain ease – particularly because she realized the fate that would otherwise have awaited him as a Jew.

Camp Westerbork

In the diaries, one can clearly see how the anti-Jewish measures increasingly impacted Etty Hillesum's life, even though she had resolved to follow the line of her own spiritual development no matter what. When she was expecting a summons to report to Camp Westerbork, she applied – at the recommendation of her brother Jaap – for a position with the *Joodsche Raad* [Jewish Council]. Through patronage, she received an appointment to the office on Lijnbaansgracht (later Oude Schans) in Amsterdam on 15 July 1942. She performed her administrative duties for the Jewish Council with reluctance, and had a negative opinion of the Council's general role. However, she found useful the work she was to do later for the department of 'Social Welfare for People in Transit' at Camp Westerbork, where she was transferred to at her own request on 30 July 1942. There, she met Joseph (Jopie) I. Vleeschhouwer and M. Osias Kormann, two men who would go on to play a major role in her life.

Her first stay at Camp Westerbork did not last long; on 14 August 1942, she was back in Amsterdam. From there, she left on 19 August 1942 to visit her parents for the last time in Deventer. Somewhere around 21 August, she returned to Camp Westerbork. By early September 1942, she was back in Amsterdam again. On 20 November 1942, she came back to Camp Westerbork, but illness forced her to go home on 5 December 1942. It was not until 5 June 1943 that she had recovered sufficiently to be *allowed* to return to Camp Westerbork. For, contrary to what one might expect, she was very keen to get back to the camp and resume her work, to provide a bit of support for the people as they were preparing themselves for transport. It was for this reason that Etty Hillesum consistently turned down offers to go into hiding. She said that she wished to "share her people's fate".

Hillesum's departure from Amsterdam on 6 June 1943 turned out to be definitive, for on 5 July 1943 the special status granted to personnel at the Camp Westerbork section of the Jewish Council came to an end. Half of the personnel had to return to Amsterdam, while the other half became camp internees. Etty Hillesum joined the latter group: she wished to remain with her father, mother, and brother Mischa, who had meanwhile been brought to Camp Westerbork. Etty Hillesum's parents had moved on 7 January 1943 from Deventer to the Retiefstraat 11^{house} in Amsterdam, after having first attempted to use doctor's orders to circumvent their forced removal. During the great raid of 20 and 21 June 1943, they were picked up – along with Mischa, who had come to live with them – and they were transported to Camp Westerbork.

At the time this occurred, efforts were already being made to obtain special dispensation for Mischa Hillesum on the grounds of his musical

talent. The sisters Milli Ortmann and Grete Wendelgest in particular were behind these efforts. Both the famous conductor Willem Mengelberg and the director of the Amsterdam Conservatory Willem Andriessen wrote letters of recommendation for Mischa Hillesum, which have been preserved. These attempts proved fruitless, due to Mischa Hillesum's insistence that his parents accompany him to Camp Barneveld where some 700 prominent Dutch Jews were interned. This demand was not allowed. Mischa Hillesum did, however, receive a number of special privileges during his stay at Camp Westerbork.

When his mother Riva Hillesum wrote a letter to the *Höhere SS-und Polizeiführer* Hanns Albin Rauter in which she asked for a few privileges as well, Rauter was enraged and, on 6 September 1943, ordered the entire family to be immediately sent on transport. The German commander at Camp Westerbork, *SS-Obersturmführer* Albert Konrad Gemmeker interpreted this order to include Ety Hillesum, despite the attempts by her contacts in the camp to protect her. His superior, Rauter, had ordered the Hillesum family to be put on transport and Ety was part of that family – such was Gemmeker's simple reasoning. On 7 September 1943, Louis, Riva, Ety, and Mischa Hillesum left Camp Westerbork on their way to Poland.

Only Jaap Hillesum did not go with them; at the time, he was still in Amsterdam. He arrived in Camp Westerbork in late September of 1943. In February 1944, he was deported to Bergen-Belsen. When that camp was partially evacuated, he was placed on a train with other prisoners. After a journey full of deprivation and hardship, the train was finally liberated by Russian soldiers in April 1945. Like so many others, however, Jaap Hillesum did not survive the journey.

Louis and Riva Hillesum either died during transport to Auschwitz or were gassed immediately upon arrival. The date of their death was given as 10 September 1943. According to the Red Cross, Ety died at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 30 November 1943, but that date is only a guess. Her brother Mischa died on 31 March 1944, probably in Camp Warsaw.

The fate of the diaries

Before her final departure to Camp Westerbork, Ety Hillesum gave her Amsterdam diaries to Maria Tuinzing, who had joined those living at Gabriel Metsustraat in 1942. Ety Hillesum asked her to pass them along to the writer Klaas Smelik, with the request to publish them if she did not return. In 1946 or 1947, Maria Tuinzing turned over the exercise books and a bundle of letters to Klaas Smelik. His daughter Johanna (in the diaries:

Jopie) Smelik then typed out sections of the diaries, but Klaas Smelik's attempts to have the diaries published in the 1950s and early 1960s proved fruitless. However, two letters Etty Hillesum had written, at the end of December 1942 and on 24 August 1943, concerning conditions in Camp Westerbork, did get published. They appeared in the autumn of 1943 in an illegal edition by David Koning, at the recommendation of Etty Hillesum's friend Petra (Pim) Eldering. This edition, with a run of one hundred copies, was printed by B.H. Nooy of Purmerend under the title *Drie brieven van den kunstschilder Johannes Baptiste van der Pluym (1843-1912)* [Three Letters from the Painter Johannes Baptiste van der Pluym (1843-1912)]. The two letters were preceded by a foreword with a biography of the artist, and followed by a third letter, both written by David Koning to camouflage the true contents. The revenues from the publication were used to provide assistance to Jews in hiding. These letters have since been republished on several occasions.

In the autumn of 1979, I approached the Dutch publisher Jan Geurt Gaarlandt with a request to publish the diaries of Etty Hillesum, given to me by my father, Klaas Smelik. This resulted in 1981 in the publication of *Het verstoorde leven* [An Interrupted Life], and in 1986 in the publication of all of Etty Hillesum's known writings in Dutch. Since then, an English, French, and Italian translation of the complete Dutch edition have appeared; a German version is in preparation. All these editions and the many translations of excerpts of her writings are – in Horace's words – a *monumentum aere perennius* [a monument more lasting than bronze] to this woman who, along with so many others, fell victim to the greatest crime of the twentieth century. Her memory has become a blessing to us all.

About the author

Klaas A.D. Smelik (1950) studied Theology, Semitic Languages, Archaeology and Ancient History in Utrecht, Amsterdam and Leiden. He defended his PhD in Amsterdam in 1977. He taught Old Testament and Hebrew in Utrecht, Amsterdam and Brussels, Ancient History in Amsterdam and The Hague, Jewish History at the K.U. Leuven, and Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ghent University. He is director of the Etty Hillesum Research Centre (EHOC) first in Ghent, now in Middelburg. Smelik edited the Dutch, English, French and Italian unabridged editions of Etty Hillesum's writings and is editor-in-chief of the *Etty Hillesum Studies*. He has (as writer or editor) published around 40 books and 250 articles on the Hebrew Bible, Ancient Hebrew inscriptions, Ancient History, Jewish Studies, Anti-Semitism, and Etty Hillesum.