

De Engelandvaart, 1940, May 14-15

Seafarers to England, 1940, May 14-15

H.L.J. Hack and 45 others

aboard the Scheveningen motor lifeboat 'Zeemanshoop'

Tuesday, May 14

16.00 Just got back from a bike trip to Voorburg near The Hague to see how a university friend got on during the war days.

Straight away on duty at the Air Protection Service, Clearing Post Wateringse Vest 40, Delft ('Luchtbeschermingsdienst, Opruimingspost'). In the direction of The Hague everything is quiet. In the South a long wall of smoke: Rotterdam is burning.

App. 18.45 With the consent of the pal I am on duty with I go to my room for a quick meal, Noordeinde 32, Delft.

Shortly before 19.00 My landlady, Mrs. Spaans rushes into my room: "We have surrendered!"

I replied, "Probably just another rumour!" I leave my spoon in the tomato soup and promise to call in at the Garrison Headquarters ('Garnizoenscommando') in Hotel Wilhelmina, some houses further along the canal ('gracht').

"I'll be back in a minute!"

Outside, the downstairs neighbour confirms the rumour.

For a moment I am at a loss to know what to do. Then I see the time on the bell tower of the Old Church - exactly seven o'clock.

19.00 The thought flashes through my mind: "Go to England".

"You have two hours before it's dark to reach the coast and get away!"

With this thought foremost in my mind, without any further

consideration - then or later - I jump on the (borrowed!) bicycle on which I went to Voorburg that afternoon and I am on my way to England.

As I pass by I cast a quick glance at the small group of confused soldiers and civilians outside the Garrison's Headquarters, check out from the Air Protection Post with a shout that "I'm going to England" and head for The Hague - Scheveningen.

Near the Hoornbrug in Rijswijk I am overtaken by a car driven by a fellow-student at the Technical University Delft ('TH-Delft'), Houtappel from Maastricht.

The car has to swerve between the barricades on the Hoornbrug which gives me a chance to catch up. Just in time I grab the handle of the car's door and ask: "Can you take me to Scheveningen?"

"Why? To England??? Are you out of your mind? Well, all right then, get in!"

The bicycle is left on the Hoornbrug and after ten minutes I am on the Gevers-Deynootplein 'Like a cock in the snow' 'not a soul to be seen!'

I walk up the Boulevard in the direction of the fishing harbour. I'm lucky to be given a lift by a man on a bicycle, the only person around.

At the harbour I meet two fellow-students from Delft, Bongaerts and Dahmen.

"Join us", they say, "over there some Jews are trying to persuade fishermen to take them to England!"

I join them, you never know; but all I see is confusion.

I have nothing to offer, 4 'dubbeltjes' in my pocket (about one shilling). My impression is that the fishermen are not going to sail! Staying here is a waste of time.

Now it's my turn to say "Join me."

"At the other side of the harbour are two lifeboats; let's try to get away on one of them!"

They think there is no chance of this, so I go on my own.

I jump on board the smallest lifeboat, the 'Prins Bernhard'.
The engine room is padlocked. Let's see if I can get a metal saw from the nearby fishing boat.

A man sticks his head above deck: "No. I will not sail; no fisherman will sail, unless their boat is requisitioned."

No time to waste! Try the other one!

The other one is the motor lifeboat 'Zeemanshoop'.

More luck this time. The engine room is open! And somebody is inside!

"Any knowledge of engines?"

"No, I'm a 1st year medical student from Groningen, Meyers is the name."

"Well, please tidy up things on deck so we can get away from the quayside and I'll try to start the engine!"

In May 1940 'starting the engine' involved more than 'just pressing the button'. The engine had to be pre-heated.

While I am trying to figure out how to do this, some help arrives, apparently a 'fisherman-engineer': "I'm willing to help you, but I will not go with you!"

He puts on the pre-heater (with a blowlamp) and after a while the engine starts. Only one cylinder appears to be working, the other is idling.

"You can start the other one yourself" he says and goes on deck; I follow him.

The deck is crowded. Bongaerts and Dahmen are on board too.

Meyers asks a soldier to shoot into the air. On the quay, the crowd shies away.

A man tries to jump aboard but falls into the water. He is pulled on board. His family remain where they are.

'Chug-chug'-ing we leave the harbour 'on one leg'. As we pass between the piers the engineer jumps ashore.

"What course?"

"North-West!" he shouts - the last words of advice from our country.

App. 21.00 We are at sea. But what next!

First priority is to clean up the mess. On deck there is no free space left, people and luggage everywhere.

Engine, steering wheel and course require attention. I'm lucky that my dirty hands and the streaks of oil on my face give me some authority.

Meyers, Bongaerts and Dahmen will be the helmsmen.

Course: as quickly as possible get out of sight from the coast; so we set a course at right angles to it, North-West.

In the meantime Meyers creates some order on deck and sorts out the available equipment.

I return to the engine, labelled 'Kromhout', Amsterdam, a child of good pedigree, but now with a stepfather.

I leave the idling cylinder alone, all my attention is given to the running one. Under no condition must this one fail!

Stopping could result in despair among the passengers.

Moreover, using the engine-starting mechanism, of which I have no experience and only understand the basic principles, would be an added risk. Avoid!

The temperature of the engine is my main problem. When it gets too high, we have to disengage the propeller. The boat then loses speed, cannot be steered and just drifts. And indeed, the temperature does become too high, and the boat begins 'drifting'. I go up on deck to arrange this. (the propeller had to be disengaged with a handle near the steering wheel) The boat slowly loses speed; the engine keeps running steadily; fortunately!

The sea is calm, but will it stay calm? We need somebody with experience of rough sea, who knows how to deal with running waves. Somebody volunteers. One worry less.

We now have something like a 'crew': a 'skipper-engineer', a 'first mate' and three 'sailor-helmsmen'.

The propeller can be engaged again and the cooling water valve opened a bit more. We drifted many more times.

Meanwhile it has become dusk. Bright sky, no moon. Nowhere, on the sea or on the horizon, is a ship to be seen. We are alone.

A message: the compass is stuck! Has somebody been sitting on it? Short discussion on deck: we'll navigate by the Polar Star and steer towards a star near the horizon and in the appropriate direction (45 degrees left of the Polar Star). And so it is done.

Castor en Pollux were the stars we steered by. I still look at them with respectful gratitude.

The night passes. On deck everything remains quiet. The engine is running steadily. At dawn the temperature remains nearly constant. No drifting anymore.

Wednesday, May 15, 1940

App. 04.30 Dawn; the stars fade away. The compass, last night useless because of the failing compass light, is reported to be working; so let's use it again. To be sure I'll check it now and then with the sun-and-watch-method.

It's not possible to walk around the deck ; there is no where to put my feet. The only way is to walk on the outboard fender.

The boat is low in the water, too low in fact. Water is splashing over the freeboard. Meyers hands oilskin coats to those who tend to get wet.

The sun rises and starts warming us. We ought not to complain. It looks as if it will be a beautiful, if uncertain, day. Always look at the bright side of the sun!

When I return to my starting point (steering wheel, engine room entrance) our 'first mate' pours out his heart: "We don't have a ghost of a chance to arrive at the other side. We better go back!"

Our answer is brief and to the point: "We go on!" And with a glance at the passengers: "We did not leave yesterday to return today!"

"In that case I cannot any longer accept responsibility for what will result in collective suicide". He rejoins the passengers again.

This incident made me think.

First, we had to face the fact that the passengers' nerves might break.

We had a doctor on board. He understood the situation and promised to keep an eye on people. I asked him to let me know at the first sign of panic. We could not afford to let things get out of control and sacrifice the whole voyage for one person.

Next, we decided to give people jobs to do to take their minds off things: a look-out for floating mines and so on. But: stay where you are!

Our doctor reported "no worries at present".

Second, we decided to make a list of those on board. And so we did.

Back in the engine room, where - considering the circumstances - everything went 'well and oily', I was resting when I realized that it was madness to continue on a North-West course any longer. On this

course we would never arrive at the coast of England, and certainly not at the Thames Estuary where the chances of being picked up would be better.

Back on deck for a captain's council.

App. 08.00 Decision to alter course to West.

But I have another plan too: since the doctor is satisfied with the passengers and I am satisfied with the engine, we should try to start the second cylinder.

The only problem was that pre-heating would be accompanied by flames and the sound and fury of the blow lamp. And that may frighten some passengers! "Well, hum, perhaps we should take the risk!" But: 'be prepared'!

I lit the blow lamp , the glowing plate was ('became') hot, the fuel injection was engaged, and the stubborn "chook, chook, chook" turned into a rhythmic "chooka chooka chooka" The engine was running on two cylinders! Praise be to Kromhout! The boat was gaining speed! A final adjustment, keep an eye on it for a while, and then back on deck to enjoy the warm sunshine. Great! But keep listening to the rhythm of the engine.

Next problem! Two cylinders will double the fuel consumption. In Scheveningen I had chosen a lifeboat because a lifeboat is not only seaworthy and easy manoeuvrable, but it's also always fully equipped and ready to go, and that must mean: with full fuel tanks.

By now, the engine had already been running for more than half a day; though on reduced power, but 'empty is empty'! Imagine what would happen if we forgot to switch to a full fuel tank! On the double, check the fuel tanks!

But alas, the fuel pipe disappeared into an inaccessible area and I could not find what I was looking for.

'Upstairs' the message "amount of fuel left not known, perhaps sufficient for another quarter of an hour, possibly longer" was received with phlegm.

And it did last longer; the engine kept running steadily and without interruption until we were picked up.....

App. 11.00? Course is altered to South. The general feeling was that this would increase our chance of being picked up soon.

App. 14.00 On the horizon we see four ships. We are heading towards them: as we get closer we decide they look like merchant ships and a destroyer. It is not clear what they are doing. It looks as if they are stationery. Customs inspection?

From the stuff Meyers had found on his survey of the boat I put on an oilskin, a yellow one, clearly visible. I position myself as visibly as I can. At the stern we hoist the Dutch 'Red, white and blue', on the mast the pennant of the Noord- en Zuid-Hollandsche Redding Maatschappij (N.Z.H.R.M.) with a knot tied in it. 'In sjouw' as the seaman calls it, which means that we are asking for help.

We receive signals from a signalling lamp. Nothing unusual for a decent vessel, but far beyond our capability.

I can do nothing better than wave my arms, expressing my helplessness.

For some time nothing happens. It looks as if they do not trust us. I stop the boat.

We see a Dutch tugboat approaching us, as far as we can tell from the direction of the Dutch coast. Her name appears to be 'Atjeh'. On board she carries English military. A "demolition party" who have done a job in IJmuiden; that is what they tell us later.

Apparently, the destroyer now understands our situation.

A launch is lowered. Talking and fussing. I can't make head or tail of it. One thing is for certain however: we have made it!!!

I feel the stress ebbing away.

Strange: stress is not felt, but un-stressing is.

Days with lack of sleep, and the extreme alertness needed during the voyage take their toll. I clam up. I only remember fragments of what happened next:

- we are on board the destroyer H.M.S. Venomous
- the first big mug of tea: "liquid mahogany, delicious!"
- an untidy mess table in the crew's quarters. Apparently the men had just finished their 'tea'. We got served as well: 'bread and butter' and corned beef and more tea!
- that the four of us had to go on deck to meet the Commanding Officer. I can no longer remember exactly what he said, but - believe it or not! - I am told he complimented us on our navigation. Plus the usual "Well done boys!".
- an encouraging maxim on a wall: "There is an eternity of rest to follow" or was it "The price of safety is eternal vigilance"?
- the mighty sensation one feels when a seagoing vessel is powering up to high speed. After a while we were going at - I guess - a speed of about 25 knots!

19.00 We disembarked and walked to the platform for the boat-train at Dover station. Some distance away, under cover, is a train; a green one, the colour of hope.

I look back. Had all of us been on that tiny little boat???

The procession passes an English "Bobby". He observes the parade: "War refugees". Silently they walk on - most of them Jews - literally with their backs to the Continent, away from their past, towards a future. Shalom, let peace be with you!

's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands, March 7, 1981

H.L.J. Hack

**List of persons on board of the motor lifeboat 'Zeemanshoop'
May 14-15, 1940**

<u>Passengers</u>	<u>Remarks</u>	
Belinfante + sister	Jurist, civil servant Dept. The Hague	2
Goldschmidt + wife		2
Mrs. Daniels		1
Jacob Meyer	Merchant in London	1
Singer		1
Fam. Stroheim, 3 women + man		4
F. Zactechek		1
Mayer + wife		2
Weyl		1
Meuleman + wife		2
Munner + wife		2
Pelmann + wife + son		3
Polak + wife + son		3
Fischer + wife		2
Goldschmidt + wife	2 nd Goldschmidt + wife	2
Marx		1
De Jonge	Officer "Prinses Irene Brigade", Adjutant to H.M. Queen of The Netherlands	1
Speyer		1
Van Wezel		1
Van Wezel		1
Blitz		1
Drukker + wife		2
Cohen		1
Neurath, Otto	Philosopher 'Wiener Kreis' (this is its one and only name. If you prefer it can be translated 'Vienna Circle'.) See also Wikipedia) Died Oxford 22-12-1945	1
Mevr. Reiden (?)		1
Wessel		1
Van der Laan		1
	Total	42

'Crew'

Harry Hack	Technical Officer Neth. Merchant Navy	1
	Technical Officer Royal Neth. Navy	
	Technical Officer R.A.F.	
Bongaerts	Officer-pilot Royal Neth. Navy	1
Dahmen	Officer Royal Neth. Navy	1
L.M. Meyers	Officer-pilot R.A.F.	1
	Total	46

Translation: R.K. Hack, 111205