

MEI 1940

SLUIPAANVAL
VADERLAND
HELDENMOED
OVERMACHT

TRANENDAL
HOUDT BRAEF STAND
IN DEN DOEDT
AFGESLACHT

ROTTERDAM
S GRAVENHAAG
IJZIGKoud
ACHTERBLIJF

VUUR EN VLAM
NEDERLAAG
ZELFBEHOUD
VEGE LIJF

SCHEVENING
MENS IN NOOD
KAPERIJ
ZEEMANSHOOP

VLUCHTELING
REDDINGBOOT
HOORT ER BIJ
NOORDZEELoop

BUITENGAATS
VUURTOORNLICHT
OVERKANT

ENGELANDWAARTS
WESTGERICHT
AANGELAND

MAX WESSEL
1989

MAY 1940 ¹

TREACHEROUS ATTACK ²
MY COUNTRY ³
HEROISM ⁴
OVERWHELMED ⁵

VALE OF TEARS
DEFEND AND RESIST ⁶
TILL DEATH FOLLOWS ⁷
SLAUGHTERED

ROTTERDAM ⁸
THE HAGUE ⁹
BITTERLY COLD
STAY BEHIND

FIRE AND FLAMES
DEFEAT
SELF-PRESERVATION
LIFE IN DANGER ¹⁰

SCHEVENINGEN ¹¹
MAN IN DISTRESS
PRIVATEER ¹²
ZEEMANSHOOP

REFUGEE
LIFEBOAT
ON BOARD ¹³
NORTH SEA CROSSING ¹⁴

OFFSHORE
LIGHTHOUSE LIGHT
THE OTHER SIDE

ENGLAND BOUND
POINTING WESTWARD
ARRIVED

MAX WESSEL ¹⁵
1989

¹ The poem is hard to translate, if only because many words have a connotation that is not evident in their English equivalents. Also the poem, like many Dutch WW-II literature from 1945 until, say, 1960, uses words that have a specific, solemn, patriotic and heroic connotation. In some cases these words also refer to the heroic Dutch 17th Century. Used within a WW-II context like is done in this poem, they evoke human essentials like resistance, suffering, fighting and defending, victory and defeat, justice and injustice, right and wrong, heroes and villains, etc. In the footnotes, these words ("17th Century ⇔ WW-II") are marked with (*).

The structure of the poem with its layout of two seemingly distinct columns, is unusual. It reads from left to right, e.g. 'Sluipaanval – tranendal', resp. 'Traacherous attack - vale of tears', and the rhyme scheme connects the left and the right column.

² 'Sluipaanval' is a hidden attack with a pejorative connotation, compare 'sluipschutter' (= 'sniper').

³ 'Vaderland' has a patriotic connotation, compare French 'La Patrie'.

⁴ 'Heldenmoed': literally 'the courage of heroes'.

⁵ 'Overmacht': here the massive supremacy, the overwhelming power of the German aggressors.

⁶ 'Houdt braef stand' (*): imperative = 'resist, by being brave, correct and courageous.'

⁷ 'In den doedt' (*): contemporary '(tot) in de dood' = 'until death follows'.

⁸ 'Rotterdam': the German bombing of Rotterdam and the subsequent burning of the city with thousands of victims.

⁹ 's Gravenhaag', a solemn abbreviation of 's-Gravenhage (the city of The Hague). Probably '-e' was omitted to preserve the rhyme: 's Gravenhaag' – 'Nederlaag'.

It is not evident why the poet has chosen The Hague: the seat of the Dutch Government who also escaped to England? the city where the Zeemanshoop's journey started? hometown of the poet?

¹⁰ 'Veeg' means 'in danger, (almost) doomed, vulnerable, short living'. 'Lijf' literally: 'living (compare 'life') body'.

¹¹ 'Schevening': a solemn abbreviation of 'Scheveningen'. Probably '-en' was omitted to preserve the rhyme: 'Schevening – Vluchteling'.

¹² 'Kaperij' (*): literally 'hijacking' but without the terrorist connotation. In the 17th Century 'kapers' were pirates (privateers) with a formal licence by the Dutch Government and thus operating like privatised Navy men. The four students

who hijacked the Zeemanshoop were a kind of modern 'kapers' (hijacking a boat for the sake a higher goal). Thus 'kaper' expresses exactly the Dutch national sentiment with regard to this brave, bold and effective escape.

¹³ '(kaperij) hoort erbij': literally 'belongs to it, is a part of it'. In this poem probably two connotations. (1) the stealing of the lifeboat (the 'kaperij') was formally not permitted, but under the given circumstances it was necessary and inevitable, it was a part of the war-game, and thus right. (2) '(vluchteling) hoort erbij' = the refugee is on board and belongs to those who manage to escape.

¹⁴ 'Noorzeeloop' is a strange word within this context. 'Loop', from 'lopen' means 'the walking or running of human beings', and sometimes 'the going of a ship' but in that case always with a connotation of speed. Probably the poet has chosen this word to preserve the rhyme: 'Zeemanshoop' – 'Noordzeeloop'.

¹⁵ Max Wessel was one of the 46 people that escaped on May, 14-15, 1940 from occupied Holland to England with the Dutch motor lifeboat Zeemanshoop. The poem was – in a distorted form – published in de 'Haagsche Courant' (a local newspaper in The Hague) of May 14, 1991, in a short article about the escape of the Zeemanshoop. An undistorted version of the poem was supplied by Mrs Lis Drew of Australia.