

Saving Elli

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To the memory of Frits and Jo Hakkens —
and those like them — who risked everything
to save others. Ordinary people who displayed
extraordinary courage, knowing it could cost them
their lives. May their sacrifice never be forgotten.

1

22 February 1941

Abraham Szanowski had had his eye on the ring for some time. It was a beautiful piece, yellow gold with a cluster of tiny sparkling diamonds and a large round, brilliant-cut centre stone — the very best cut, colour and clarity, according to his jeweller friend Isaac Kaplan. Gita, Abraham's wife, had celebrated her twenty-seventh birthday exactly a week before, but Abraham had been confined to bed, too ill to leave the apartment, so had not been able to get her birthday present until now. He wasn't quite sure he could afford the ring, but Gita deserved it. And business had been good, even under the tightening grip of the Nazi occupation of Holland and the relentless persecution of Jews.

Today was a Saturday — the day of rest, or Shabbos, for Ashkenazi Jews like Abraham — and he dressed for the synagogue: a smartly tailored, single-breasted grey herringbone coat with three buttons down the front and

two large flap pockets. A Star of David was sewn next to the left-hand lapel. By 9 a.m. he was ready to descend the narrow staircase from their apartment above his tailor's shop on Eerste van Swindenstraat in east Amsterdam. He would look at the ring one more time. Truth be told, he had already made up his mind: he would buy it for his wife.

Isaac's shop was nestled in the Jewish Quarter and, if he hurried, Abraham could purchase the ring and still make it home before they needed to leave for the synagogue. He hadn't told Gita where he was going; he wanted the gift to be a surprise.

'I have some business matters to attend to,' he called over his shoulder as he bounded down the stairs. 'But I'll be back in time for the Shabbos service. And I haven't forgotten the family lunch.' The lunch for their extended family — his brother Jacob and wife Cilly, and their two children, — was to celebrate the birth of Elli, their second child.

The thirty-three-year-old whistled as he made his way towards the jeweller's, finding happiness today despite all the misery being heaped on Jews. Ten days earlier the Jewish Quarter had been barricaded with barbed wire and checkpoints set up around the perimeter. The uneasy peace that followed seemed to settle the neighbourhood, but tensions still simmered below the fragile surface. Occasional outbreaks of violence cracked the illusion of calm. Still, everything seemed peaceful on this Saturday morning as Abraham strolled through Waterlooplein square. The usual bustle of the local market allayed any fears of unrest.

Outside Isaac's shop, he stopped abruptly, startled. His

eye had caught the hand-painted sign with its crude, black letters screaming ‘Jews Get Out!’. But that wasn’t what had disturbed him. Sickening, racist slogans like this were common enough — he himself had only just scrubbed ‘Jewish Scum’ graffiti from his own shopfront, and the week before it had been ‘Go Home Yiddish Bastards’. This was different. A grotesque image had been scrawled across the window: a Star of David dangling from a gallows pole. Below it, words that bred hatred: ‘Exterminate All Jews’. A death threat; altogether more sinister.

The bell jangled briskly as Abraham pushed open the swing door. He pointed to the paint-splattered window. ‘Will they ever stop?’ he asked Isaac, with a despairing sigh. ‘When will this madness end?’

Isaac looked up from behind the counter and shook his head. ‘When these cursed Nazis are defeated and run out of our country, that’s when. Every day, it’s abuse, intimidation, threats. The graffiti? That’s the least of my worries. It’s the violence that concerns me most.’

‘So true, Isaac. And our own people — the younger Jews in particular — they’re fighting back, and I fear that will just make things worse. Escalate the violence. Did you hear about what happened at the Koco ice cream parlour a few days ago?’

Isaac nodded.

‘An ammonia gas trap,’ Abraham pressed on, his voice tinged with admiration, ‘rigged up to the entry door. The second those German thugs forced their way in, the gas sprayed right in their faces.’

Isaac nodded again.

‘Temporarily blinded some of them, injured others. They say it was chaos.’

‘Yes, I’d heard that, too.’

It was Abraham’s turn to nod. ‘Ingenious and courageous, Isaac. But nothing good will come of it. Of that, I’m sure.’

‘You’re right, Abraham. And what about that NSB guy — the Dutch Nazi — Koot, Henry Koot . . .’

‘Hendrik,’ Abraham corrected.

‘Yes, yes, Hendrik Koot. Wounded by Jews who fought back after the Nazis started a brawl. Died, I hear. There will be repercussions for that. We should just learn to accept their draconian rules and try to live peacefully. Perhaps they’ll leave us alone if we don’t retaliate.’

‘Perhaps,’ Abraham said slowly, his voice full of despair, ‘but I doubt it. These Nazi fanatics hate Jews and everything we represent. They want to wipe us out. I’m not sure why, but they do. Look at the restrictions they’ve already imposed: firing Jews from civil service jobs and teaching, banning Jewish cultural performances. We can’t go to cafés or restaurants, parks, libraries, museums — oh, and so much more. It’s *relentless*. Every month there are new bans and controls. And I fear this is just the start.’ Abraham paused, almost forgetting the reason for his visit. ‘Just the start, Isaac.’

Isaac stared at the ground. ‘I can only hope you’re wrong, Abraham.’

Abraham opened his mouth to say more, but thought better of it. ‘Now, the ring, Isaac. Can I have another look at the ring?’

‘The ring. Ah, yes, of course.’ Isac unlocked a display cabinet, placed the ring on a tray covered with black velvet and handed Abraham a loupe — a jeweller’s magnifying glass.

‘Take a look for yourself, Abraham. It’s a lot of money and I want to make sure you’re happy with what you buy.’

Abraham took the loupe and pressed it to his right eye, squinting as he examined the ring.

‘Note the clarity of the centre diamond; it’s flawless.’

Abraham nodded sagely, but in fact he had no idea how to tell a perfect diamond from a flawed one. Or a fake one, for that matter. The stones sparkled and danced in the sunlight, radiating a rainbow of colours: violets, reds, blues, greens and yellows — and that was good enough for Abraham.

‘I’ll take it,’ he declared.

‘You’ve made a wise choice, Abraham,’ Isaac said as he carefully placed the ring into a red box trimmed with gold. ‘You won’t regret it.’ This was no salesman’s talk; Isaac was completely genuine, known around the Jewish community for his honesty and integrity. Abraham counted out the guilders carefully, fingering each note as he slid it over the counter. He still wasn’t certain he could afford the ring, but Gita would love it. Of that he *was* certain. He slipped the box with the ring into his coat pocket; he would wrap it later. Gita’s surprise and delight when she opened her gift would be worth every guilder he had paid.

‘Thanks so much, Isaac. And for letting me come on Shabbos. I appreciate it.’

Isaac brushed off the gratitude with a wave of his hand.

‘It was nothing, Abraham. Anything for an old friend. I only hope you’re wrong about the Nazis ramping up the violence.’

‘So do I, Isaac. So do I.’ Somehow, agreeing with his friend gave him a glimmer of hope, but in his heart Abraham knew he wasn’t wrong.

As he hurried across the footbridge towards Jonas Daniël Meijerplein and the route home, Abraham hummed contentedly and from time to time stroked the tiny square box in his coat pocket to reassure himself it was still there. A smile slid across his lips as he imagined Gita’s reaction when she opened it.

Approaching the square of Meester Visserplein, he slowed, glancing into the window of a haberdashery shop. Using the glass as a mirror, Abraham smoothed his hair and straightened his tie. He was a tailor, after all, and liked to look his best when he was out and about. As he was about to turn away, however, he saw another reflection in the window — one that terrified him. A mass of dark-green uniforms surging around the corner, marching towards him. The unmistakable sight of the Nazi Ordnungspolizei, dozens of them. In this neighbourhood that could mean only one thing: they were hunting Jews. His gut tightened; he had to get away. With no time to think, Abraham sprinted to the left — but his path was blocked. Soldiers on horseback and motorcycles with sidecars guarded the exits to the square;

trucks with machine guns mounted on their cab roofs rolled through the side streets.

Breathing hard, Abraham raced back along Meester Visserplein, his eyes darting as he searched for an alleyway or an open door, anywhere to hide. Others were doing the same, pushing and shoving their way past one another in desperation. An elderly woman stumbled as someone pushed past, and fell to the ground, the contents of her shopping bag spilling out across the road. Abraham ran past, then stopped and turned back; no one else did. Breathless, he checked on the woman. She was okay. Around them, men were running in all directions, some dragging young boys behind them, all seeking a refuge they would not find. Escape was impossible: the Ordnungspolizei had blocked all exits and the open square offered no cover.

Abraham bolted towards the Portuguese Synagogue on Jonas Daniël Meijerplein, his only hope. But halfway there he froze, seeing his friend and fellow tailor, Arnold Groenteman, struggling with two Nazis.

‘Jewish scum!’ one screamed, his voice laced with venom. He spat in Arnold’s face, then cracked him across the temple with a wooden baton. Arnold cowered, trying to shield himself, but another brutal blow sent him sprawling to the ground. The polished leather of a jackboot flashed in the sun as it lunged at Arnold’s head, making a sickening crunch as it smashed into his skull.

Abraham was raging inside, but there was nothing he could do. Arnold was lying on the ground, his body limp, motionless. Getting no reaction, the Germans soon tired of

beating him and moved on to their next victim: an elderly man, stooped and frail, with only a walking stick to defend himself. His age was no defence: he was attacked with the same brutality as the young and healthy.

Abraham was out of options; he turned, desperately looking for shelter, but saw none. He ran, blindly, but before he could get very far three Nazis surrounded him. Abraham ducked as they closed in, narrowly avoiding one leather-gloved fist, but the next strike landed — a vicious uppercut slammed into his jaw. Dazed, he tottered on his feet, trying to keep his balance. He moved to the right, blocking another blow with his arm. His assailant stepped to his left until they were eyeing each other. Abraham was gasping, blowing frosty breaths into the chill winter air. He darted the other way, losing his balance as he turned, but just as he steadied himself, something heavy — a metal rod — bashed him on the back of the head, this time knocking him on to the cobbled road. A haze clouded his eyes.

‘Worthless piece of shit!’ his attacker snarled, as he put his boot into Abraham’s ribs. Something snapped; his ribcage was on fire. He tried to stand, but another boot to the midriff knocked the breath from his lungs and sent him tumbling again.

Abraham’s gaze flicked to Arnold. He was still lying prone; not moving, his eyes glazed over staring straight at Abraham. Not a flicker of recognition. Nothing. A tiny wisp of misty air rising from his swollen lips was the only sign of life. Abraham had no time to reflect further; a steel-capped boot smashed into his jaw. His head jerked back, and a sharp

pain radiated through his skull. He tasted blood, then spat out shards of tooth.

All around him, Jewish men were being rounded up; some beaten with truncheons, others with rifle butts, boots and iron bars. Most gave up without a fight. Hauled to his feet by two muscled thugs, Abraham was dragged across the square, toes scraping the paving. Blood trailed from his drooping jaw. He joined lines of men kneeling in submission, their hands planted on their heads. Glaring at their prisoners, the Ordnungspolizei levelled their rifles, threatening to shoot if anyone moved.

Someone did. A sudden movement caught Abraham's eye as one terrified man broke free, sprinting towards Weesperstraat. The cackle of a single machine gun rattled through the morning air. Pigeons perched on poles and rooftops squawked and scrambled, as if they, too, feared being trapped in the Nazi net. The fleeing man fell. In running for his life, he had lost it.

Anyone who shifted their hands, even slightly, or squirmed to relieve the pressure on their knees was set upon by vicious Ordnungspolizei dogs or beaten until they collapsed. For over three hours they endured the pain, the cramp, the numbness and the muscle strain from kneeling on the unforgiving ground. When the men were finally ordered to stand, few could get their limbs to move — inviting yet another beating. Dogs and rifles herded the prisoners to an adjacent residential street, used as a temporary holding pen. There they were held even longer. Abraham wasn't sure how long; he had lost track of time.

Abraham cursed his bad luck. Had he not been sick the week before, he would have been nowhere near the Jewish Quarter. He would have given the ring to Gita on her birthday, and they would have been to the synagogue and enjoyed the celebratory lunch to follow. Instead, he was caught in this nightmare.

The sun was sinking by the time the trucks arrived. Abraham was thrust on to the deck of a canopied Opel Blitz. He spat out more blood. His jaw was throbbing, but at least it wasn't broken. Through the mist of pain, he recognised two familiar faces — Ruben Löwenstein, an importer, and Fritz Rothstein, a kosher butcher — both good men, both going about their daily business, causing no harm, meaning no offence. A solemn nod passed between the three of them: an unspoken acknowledgement of their shared fate.

A glimpse of Arnold being lifted onto a Volkswagen truck brought some fleeting relief. *His friend was alive*. Arnold smiled at Abraham; a grim smile, but a smile nevertheless.

As the Opel spluttered into life, lurching forward with a sudden jolt, Abraham surveyed the carnage. Word had spread and the square was now filled with frantic relatives and desperate friends, a frenzied mass of chaos and confusion. Women wailing and crying out for loved ones; children scouring the square for missing fathers; captured husbands shouting encouragement to their wives to stay strong; and a few, a reckless few, shouting abuse at the attackers from the safety of hidden alcoves.

Ruben's voice broke through the din. 'What's happening? Why are they doing this?'

Fritz's reply was filled with loathing. 'Who the hell knows? The Nazis hate us, that's for sure, but this . . . this is barbaric — worse than anything they've done before. So, no, I don't know why.'

Abraham said nothing. *He* knew why: it was vengeance, pure and simple. The Germans were exacting their revenge for Jewish retaliation against Nazi atrocities. Abraham's eyes roved around the square again. A wall of soldiers was now moving in unison, pushing the crowd back, driving them away from the square.

The truck rolled on, leaving distraught friends and relatives behind. Abraham had no idea where the Nazis were taking him but he was certain it would be somewhere he didn't want to go.

2

24–26 February 1941

Godiferidus Hakkens — Frits to everyone who knew him — and his fiancée, Johanna Marijnissen — Jo — were outraged when they learned about the *razzia*, the first mass rounding-up of Dutch Jews. A *razzia* the Nazis were calling it. All their friends felt the same way.

‘Frits, we can’t stand by.’ Jo’s eyes flashed as she faced her fiancé. ‘These Nazis can’t take over our country and treat Jews — decent people — like they’re animals. Look at what they’ve done already: cruel laws and bans that strip away the freedoms we Dutch enjoy. And now this *razzia* yesterday. It was vile. It’s not just wrong, Frits — it’s monstrous. We must fight back.’

Frits sucked on his cigarette and blew a column of smoke skywards. His eyes locked with hers. ‘You’re right, Jo. We *must* fight back. And we will.’ His voice was measured but held a conviction that surprised Jo. Frits was normally the

placid one, even-tempered and never aggressive unless he was really riled. ‘What have the Jews done to deserve this sort of savagery? *Not a thing*. Not a *single* thing. So, yes, Jo, we will strike back at the moffen.’ He spat the words out, using the derogatory Dutch term for the hated occupiers.

Most Amsterdammers were incensed at the recent events. The city’s citizens, known for their compassion and tolerance, welcomed the Jews as friends, neighbours and compatriots — law-abiding people who deserved none of the animosity Hitler directed at them. So, it wasn’t surprising that some took immediate action. On the morning of 24 February, ‘strike’ notices began to appear around Amsterdam, in windows and parks, on walls and factory doors. By mid-afternoon, they were everywhere.

‘Staakt! Staakt! Staakt!!!’, the posters screamed. ‘Strike for our rights. Stop the persecution of Jews. Stand firm for your fellow citizens. Workers of Amsterdam: unite against these atrocities. Strike tomorrow between 6AM and 8PM.’

The Communist Party had called the strike, but soon the Dutch Trade Union Federation and other leftist groups echoed the rallying cry. Frits and Jo were among the first to pledge their support. Word spread quickly, and by early morning on the twenty-fifth, thousands of workers had downed tools and assembled to show their solidarity with the Jewish community and their opposition to Nazi rule. The tram drivers were the first to go out, at dawn, paralysing the entire transport system. It was a courageous decision to strike on that cold February day. No other Nazi-occupied country had dared to challenge the German occupiers with

such an organised and widespread protest.

The Germans had underestimated the Dutch, assuming that the violence of the razzia would break their spirit — that fear of reprisals would keep them in line. Or even that the Dutch wouldn't care about the fate of the Jews. So confident was Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the Reichskommissar for the German-occupied Netherlands, that there would be no trouble following the razzia that he had left for vacation in Austria.

He was wrong.

Frits and Jo pushed their way to the front, to the heart of the protest. Around them the strikers surged, waving placards and shouting slogans. They stood, defiantly, in Jonas Daniël Meijerplein — the very spot where Abraham had been so brutally beaten just days before.

The square, named after a celebrated Jewish lawyer, was normally a bustling hub near the centre of Amsterdam. On any other day it would be filled with the chatter of friends over coffee, overcoated shoppers darting into cozy stores, and hurrying office workers rushing to their next appointment. But this wasn't any other day. The lively cafés and quaint shops now bore witness to an historic uprising. Strikers flooded the square, placards held high, screaming at the small contingent of Germans lining the square. Taken by surprise, the bewildered soldiers simply looked on. Having no orders, they hesitated, unsure whether to act or retreat.

With his peaked cap pulled low to conceal his face, Frits closed his fist around the batten of his placard and bellowed: ‘Weg met de moffen!’ ‘Down with the Germans!’ He knew the risks, but fear would not stop him. *Someone* had to stand up. Beside him, Jo’s voice rang out with the same zeal. ‘Vrijheid en recht!’ — ‘Freedom and justice!’ — her breath clouding the wintry air.

Soon, thousands more joined the strike, both young and old: students, shopkeepers, schoolteachers, farmers, clerks, doctors. By mid-morning the square was heaving with angry citizens and word was that many more had gathered at other protest hotspots. Tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, left their desks, tools, farms and workplaces to take part in an unstoppable rally. Amsterdam was brought to a shuddering halt.

‘Let’s show the moffen what we Dutch are made of!’ yelled a booming voice above the clamour. Cheers erupted in response. Protesters linked arms and stood as one, daring the Germans to intervene.

Jo looked around the packed square. ‘There are thousands here, Frits, maybe ten thousand or more. I’ve never seen so many people in one place at one time.’

Frits nodded, his eyes also scanning the crowd — then wandering towards the Germans on the fringes of the square. ‘I pray to God they don’t open fire, Jo. It would be mass slaughter.’

But there was no time to worry about a machine-gun attack. A scuffle broke out suddenly in front of them, with two soldiers bearing down on a lone teenager. One clamped

a suffocating headlock on to the boy, squeezing the life out of him. Frits reacted instantly and instinctively, turning and grabbing the soldier's wrist. With a sharp twist he broke the man's hold, releasing the boy.

'Go! Go!' he urged the relieved youngster, thrusting him into the midst of the mass of people and disappearing back into the crowd himself.

Most of the Germans were still looking on, confused, as the protestors pushed forward. The troops had been caught off-guard, unprepared for this wave of resistance bringing Amsterdam to a standstill. Officers scrambled for orders from their superiors. Soldiers levelled their rifles but hesitated, awaiting the command to shoot. Others swung batons and jabbed bayonets in an attempt to control the insurrection. But most did nothing, unsure how to handle the uprising.

Meanwhile, the numbers in the square swelled, and the chants intensified. 'We stand united against Nazis!' a man beside Jo screamed above the racket, his voice breaking under the strain.

'Go home you Nazi bastards and leave us in peace!' another shouted.

'These Nazi devils have no right to be here,' the first man said to Jo, lowering his voice and leaning closer. 'We must rid our country of these monsters.' He cupped his hands around his mouth and carried on yelling, by now almost hoarse: 'Death to the moffen!'

Another voice came from behind Jo, this one female and quieter. 'What these Nazi scum did to those poor Jews . . . it's

despicable. Callous and unforgivable. No one deserves to be treated like that.'

Jo turned, and pulled the woman into a tight embrace. 'We'll never give in,' she whispered, her hand soothing the woman's back. 'They'll pay for their crimes.'

The demonstration remained orderly — mostly. A few clashes erupted, with angry shouts turning into sporadic scuffles as protesters provoked soldiers and confronted collaborators skulking on the fringes. As the sunset started to cast a pall over the square, the protesters drifted away in groups. They had proved their point: the Dutch would not bow to tyranny. Emboldened by the passive Nazi response, the order was passed from one band of workers to another, from one protest location to the next.

'Tomorrow, we strike again.'



Frits and Jo walked arm in arm down Plantage Middenlaan, the day's events playing out in their minds.

Jo broke the silence. 'Do you think it mattered, Frits? Do you think the Nazis will take any notice? That they'll realise how determined we are to fight back?'

'I doubt it, Jo. They'll just impose more laws to crush any resistance. But I'm glad we did it. I'm glad we've shown them that the Dutch won't lie down and be trodden on. Tomorrow might be a different story, though. I think there might be trouble.' He hesitated. 'I need to be ready for that.'

Jo wrapped her arms around Frits. 'I'm proud of what we

did,' she whispered. 'And tomorrow we'll show these devils what Dutch defiance really looks like.'

Frits took a step back and frowned, concerned at her words. 'Jo, listen to me. You *can't* join the strike again tomorrow. I won't let you. There will be trouble — I know it — and I don't want to see you hurt. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you.'

'Nonsense,' Jo retorted. 'Are you saying that a woman can't stand up to these Nazi pigs?'

'No, not at all. That's not what I meant. It's just that I can't bear the thought of you getting hurt.'

'I'm not afraid of the Germans, Frits. If they think they can come to Holland and suppress the Dutch without a fight, they've underestimated our resolve. We'll fight them with everything we've got. I'm going, Frits — and that's that!'

Frits knew it was pointless to argue with the strong-willed Jo. Secretly, he admired her courage — it was one of the many things he loved about her. He was still worried for her safety, but put his hands to his head and murmured, 'If you must . . .'

'Yes, Frits, I must,' she said, with steely determination. 'And I will.'

Twenty-one-year-old Frits worked as a fitter and turner at the Fokker aircraft factory — now, of course, under Nazi control and churning out German military aircraft. As he loathed the Nazis and what they were doing to Holland, and

wasn't prepared to sit back and do nothing, Frits did what he could to disrupt workflow. Slowing production, delaying deliveries, sending the wrong components to the assembly line, misplacing critical tools, mislabelling engine parts. Nothing too serious; nothing that would land him in too much trouble. He did want to do more, but wasn't sure how.

A staunch Socialist, Frits was passionate about protecting workers' rights. He blamed Holland's pre-war problems on one group — the capitalists: the factory owners and businessmen who grew rich off the sweat and toil of ordinary workers. In his eyes, they had a lot to answer for; they were destroying the Holland he loved, and he had marched in protests, waving red flags and handing out flyers. A dedicated non-conformist, he wouldn't be told by anyone what he should do and how he should do it.

Frits had a way of making people underestimate him. With his relaxed demeanour and easy charm he put people at ease, lulling them into a false sense of security. But behind those twinkling eyes was a razor-sharp mind; one that had no time for fools or foolishness. Frits set his standards high and expected no less from others around him.

His face was a study in contrasts — sharp cheekbones, a lean jaw, thick eyebrows and a cheeky smile that made him look both suave and mischievous in equal parts. His wavy hair, always slicked back, gleamed, and a cigarette was perpetually fixed to his lips. And then there was his wink — sometimes playful, sometimes teasing, always friendly. When he wasn't wearing his grease-streaked overalls, Frits dressed like a man who had places to be — smart jackets,

crisp white shirts, pressed trousers and polished shoes.

Jo's days were totally different to Frits's. One of thirteen children, she had just turned twenty and worked as a nanny and housekeeper for the Szanowski family. Jo loved her job. The general housekeeping duties — dusting, cleaning, washing, ironing and bed-making — weren't onerous and Gita, Abraham Szanowski's kindly wife, treated her more like a friend than an employee. They chatted and laughed and shared confidences. Abraham wasn't always around — a tailor's life was busy — but he was always courteous and respectful.

But it was little Elli, the Szanowskis' young daughter, who truly captivated Jo. She gurgled and dribbled her way into Jo's heart. Elli was almost as close to Jo as she was to Gita.

It was Jo's dream to become a seamstress. But jobs in Nazi-occupied Holland were scarce and she had gladly accepted the Szanowskis' offer of employment. Housekeeping for a tailor was as close to her dreams as she could hope to get. That is, until Abraham took her aside one day and offered to teach her the basics of tailoring. Jo seized the opportunity, and spent every spare moment mastering needlework skills — sewing, stitching, hemming, cutting, sizing — and learning all about fabrics and design. Soon, her steady hands and sharp eye made her a talented seamstress in her own right.

Jo carried herself with effortless grace. Poised, elegant and always impeccably dressed, she had a regal air about her. Her flowing hair, perfectly set in pin curls, framed a face full of life, with soft, endearing eyes and a magnetic smile that drew people to her. She radiated warmth, but there was also

a resilience about her — she was not a woman to be messed with or ignored. Jo was compassionate but not complacent, generous but not gullible. Tireless, clever and determined, she had a commanding presence, with a strength of character that set her apart from others of her age.

Both Frits and Jo had learnt German at school, and spoke it well enough to understand and be understood; not that they wanted to. Recently engaged, they had no firm wedding plans — not with the war on, anyway — but knew in their hearts that they would spend the rest of their lives together.

Frits's instincts had been right: when the second day of the strike dawned, the Nazis were ready. It was clear that they would not be humiliated again, that the challenge to their authority would not go unpunished. The order had been given: shoot first, ask questions later.

But the protesters came anyway, undaunted and undeterred. The numbers had thinned, perhaps dissuaded by Nazi threats of retribution. But the defiance and determination of the hard-core strikers remained strong. Waving the same banners and chanting the same slogans, they made sure the Nazis knew their resistance wouldn't be silenced. Wehrmacht soldiers, hundreds of them, stood with rifles raised and bayonets at the ready, daring the strikers to give them an excuse to fire.

Frits and Jo were right in the thick of it again, at the front of the protest. Despite Frits's pleas to remain home,

Jo hadn't wavered: she would take her place with the rest of the patriots.

'Get out of Holland, Nazi pigs!' someone shouted; another yelled 'Leave us alone, Jew-haters!' Other insults could be heard rising above the noise of the raucous crowd. Then the trouble started. A German soldier broke ranks, thrusting a bayonet into a protester's stomach. Blood flowed, enraging the already angry protesters. A flying rock struck the soldier on the head. It was just a graze, but it was enough to start a riot. The soldiers levelled their rifles, while the demonstrators grabbed whatever weapons they could lay their hands on. Bottles, rocks, bricks, pipes, iron bars; some had come prepared with knuckledusters and knives. Frits tore the cardboard from Jo's placard and brandished the wooden batten.

Being a woman didn't save Jo from the onslaught. A German soldier swung his baton and sent her sprawling on to the cobblestones. She screamed, and clawed wildly at her assailant. The soldier lashed out with his boot, burying it in her stomach; she wheezed, winded, and squeaked out a plea to Frits who spun around to see the boot striking again, leaving Jo writhing helplessly on the ground. Frits rounded on her attacker, charging at him with fists flying. He connected with a lucky right hook, hitting the man squarely on the jaw, but though he staggered, the soldier didn't fall.

Snorting with rage, the German bore down on Frits, his baton raised. Frits feinted to the right, then darted to the left to dodge the blow; but he wasn't quick enough and the baton cracked into his temple. An explosion of pain radiated

through his skull; he shook his head to try to clear it. Dazed, he turned to face his assailant, but now two more soldiers had joined the fray. Out the corner of his eye Frits glimpsed a glint of steel. One of the newcomers swung his rifle like a club, grunting from the effort. Frits ducked but was too slow again: the stock slammed against his head, and he fell.

The three soldiers pummelled and kicked and bashed Frits until his eyes misted over, a fuzz of blurred images drifting in and out of his vision. The salty, metallic tang of blood flooded his mouth. He thought he saw Jo getting to her feet, but couldn't be sure. Before he lost consciousness, Frits could make out the hazy shapes of others being beaten all around him. Then nothing.

The tide of the strike had turned: the Germans were in control. Battered, but not broken, the strikers left while they could. It was over. The Germans had suppressed the resistance.

The square was littered with casualties, dozens of them, trying their best to stagger to their feet and flee. German soldiers swarmed the area; arresting those who were still alive, leaving the dead where they lay.

A Wehrmacht Leutnant approached Frits's limp body and nudged him with his boot. No movement, not even a twitch. He kicked him again. Nothing.

The officer sneered. 'This prick's gone,' he declared. 'Just another dead Dutchman.'