

Etty Hillesum

Additional Information about the Writer

Esther (Etty) Hillesum was born on January 15, 1914, in her parents' home at Molenwater 77 in Middelburg. Her brother Jacob (Jaap) was born two years later in 1916, and her brother Michael (Mischa) was born in 1920. Levie (Louis) Hillesum, their father, who was a school teacher, regularly switched schools, and because of that, the family moved frequently. The three children were raised in a family in which their father spent most of his time reading books or at work and their mother Riva (Rebecca) ran a chaotic household.



Birthplace of Etty Hillesum, Molenwater 77, Middelburg
(Etty Hillesum Huis)



Etty during her school years (Etty Hillesum Huis)



Etty, Rebecca, Mischa, Japp and Louis
Hillesum (Etty Hillesum Huis)

In 1932, following her graduation from secondary school, she moved to Amsterdam to study law. She completed her law degree and also studied Slavic languages in Amsterdam and Leiden.

In February 1941, Etty met the psychoanalyst Julius Spier, who had studied under Carl Gustav Jung, the famous Swiss psychologist and founder of analytical psychology. A month later, she began therapy with Spier. Spier played a vital role in Etty's spiritual and personal growth. He encouraged her to begin keeping a diary, which she would continue to do for most of her remaining life. This diary and the many letters that she wrote during the last two years of her life are a chronicle of life for a Jewish woman under the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Among the major themes in these writings are Etty's Jewish identity and spiritual growth, her efforts to live life to the fullest and her refusal to be defined by her circumstances, her determination to find beauty among the chaos surrounding her, and her continuing belief in the fundamental goodness of humanity.



One of the exercise books in which Etty Hillesum wrote her diary (Reproduced in Judith Koelemeijer, *Etty Hillesum: het verhaal van haar leven* (Amsterdam, 2022)

As round-ups of Jews intensified in July 1942, Etty was offered an administrative job at the Jewish Council. She was pessimistic about the Jewish Council, which she described as “a piece of driftwood on the ocean after a shipwreck with people clinging on to it for dear life.” She asked to be transferred to the Jewish Council-operated department of "Social Welfare for People in Transit" at Westerbork transit camp. She worked there for more than a year.

In 1943, Etty refused offers to go into hiding, much to the dismay of her non-Jewish friends. This refusal was due to her belief that her duty was to support others scheduled to be transported from Westerbork to the concentration camps in German-occupied Poland and Germany. On 5 July 1943, her personnel status was suddenly revoked, and she became a camp internee, along with her father, mother, and brother Mischa, who had arrived in Westerbork in June.

On September 6, the deportation orders for the Hillesum family arrived. The next day, a train with 987 people left Westerbork. It arrived at its destination, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Nazi-occupied Poland, on September 10, three days later. Although the exact date of her death cannot be confirmed, it is likely that she died by the end of November 1943.



Memorial plaque (*Stolperstein*) in Amsterdam

Timeline

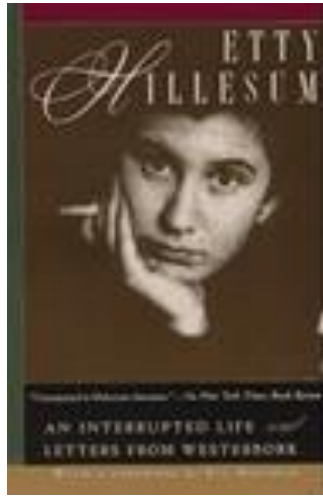
- 1914 (15 January) Born in her family home in the town of Middelburg, the oldest of the three children of a Dutch Jewish family
- 1926 Begins *Gymnasium* (high school) in Deventer in the school of which her father is the director
- 1932 Moves from her family home to Amsterdam to study law; after earning her law degree, she begins studying Slavic languages
- 1941 Meets “psychochirologist” (Jungian palm reader) Julius Spier (1887-1942), who influences her spiritual growth and encourages her to keep a diary to record her inner growth; (8 March) Begins a diary that she will continue working on for almost the rest of her life
- 1942 (15 July) Begins administrative duties for the Jewish Council in Amsterdam; requests transfer to the department of "Social Welfare for People in Transit" at Westerbork, where she will work for more than a year, except for short breaks
- 1943 (6 June) Returns to Westerbork for the last time
 - (5 July) Special status of Jewish Council employees is revoked; Etty chooses to remain at Westerbork rather than return to Amsterdam so that she can be with her parents and brother Mischa, who had arrived on June 21, and becomes an internee herself.
 - Gives her diaries to her friend Maria Tuinzing, with the instruction they be passed to writer Klaas Smelik for publication, should she not survive.

(September 7) Deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau with her family

(no later than November 30) Dies in Auschwitz-Birkenau

1981 Publication of an abridged version of diaries under the title *Het verstoorde leven* (An Interrupted Life)

1996 Publication of English translation (by Arnold J. Pomerans) of *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork*



Life Interrupted (Het Verstoorde Leven),
monument in Deventer by Arno Kramer
in remembrance of Etty Hillesum

Primary and Other Sources

Etty Hillesum. <http://www.jhm.nl/cultuur-en-geschiedenis/personen/h/hillesum%2C%2Betty>
Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.

Etty Hillesum. The Etty Hillesum House, Middelburg.
<https://ettyhillesumhuis.nl/en/etty-hillesum/>

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Wolfe, Patrick Shane. "Etty Hillesum Safeguards God: The Story of Her Spiritual Transformation during the Holocaust." 29 September 2018. (Viewed on 2 April 2025)
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