

Marion Pritchard

Background to the Crisis

The Netherlands (Holland) was occupied by Nazi Germany in May 1940, during the *blitzkrieg* (“lightning war”) in which Germany occupied Norway and Denmark (April), Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg (May), and France (June).

The first anti-Jewish measures began in Holland in June 1940. The first Nazi raid on Amsterdam’s Jewish population incited a general strike on February 25, 1941.

Until 1943, resistance in the Netherlands was largely nonviolent. One of the most widespread resistance activities was hiding and sheltering refugees and enemies of the Nazi regime, especially Jewish individuals and families. which included concealing Jewish families

Additional Information about the Rescuer

Pritchard was born Marion Philippina van Binsbergen (later Pritchard) on 7 November 1920 in Amsterdam. She was the daughter of liberal judge Jacob van Binsbergen, who was on the board of regents for the prisons of Amsterdam, and Grace van Binsbergen, who was English. She recalled going to school with Jews in every class and reported that they were "considered Dutch like everyone else."

She entered the Amsterdam School of Social Work in 1939 instead of enrolling in medical school as she had planned since she did not want to sign the Nazi loyalty oath required of medical students.

Marion was a social worker when, in 1941, she was arrested and imprisoned as a result of being mistakenly identified as a member of a student resistant group.

In 1942, after witnessing the Nazis remove children from a Jewish orphanage for deportation, Marion committed herself to saving Jewish lives. She hid a Jewish boy, Jan Herben, in her parents’ apartment. Soon, she joined an underground movement and worked as a courier, visiting children at their hiding place and transporting them to a new address by train or on the back of her bicycle. She also supplied them with false identity papers, ration cards and medical aid. Marion even went to the town hall to register herself as an unwed mother and claim some of the children as her own.

One of the most dramatic moments in van Binsbergen’s rescue work involved a family late she had been hiding since late 1942. She had been asked to shelter Fred Polak and his three young children, including a baby named Erica. When there was an inspection by local police or a suspected raid, Fred Polak and his children would hide in a hole that had been dug under a table and covered with a rug.



Fred Polak with his daughter Erica

One night in 1944, a local Dutch policeman appeared without warning and saw the Polak family entering their hiding spot. Without hesitation, Marion shot the policeman dead with a small pistol that a colleague in the Resistance had given her for emergencies. A local butcher and undertaker who were active in the Resistance helped Marion secretly bury the body.

In an oral interview with Debórah Dwork in 2001, Marion said: “I wish there had been another way. But I have thought about it for fifty years, and I still do not know what that might be. I wasn’t going to let him take the children. And so I shot him. “

By the end of the war, Marion noted, she had “killed, stolen, lied, everything. I had broken every one of the Ten Commandment, except maybe the first.”

Not until the 1980’s, more than three decades after the end of the war, did Marion begin speaking in public about her experiences. She realized that Holocaust deniers would be harder to challenge if those who had witnessed and experienced the Nazi German era did not speak out.

Timeline

- 1920 (November 7) Born in Amsterdam
- 1940 Enrolls in a school for social work in Amsterdam
- 1942 Witnesses a roundup of Jews in Amsterdam and decides to devote herself to resistance and rescue work
- 1945 Works for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in Germany at a displaced-persons camps; meets, then marries, Anton "Tony" Pritchard, a recently discharged US Army officer who also worked for UNRRA



Wedding portrait of Marion Pritchard in the Windsheim displaced persons' camp (Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

- 1947 Moves with her husband to the United States, settles in Waccabuc, NY, where she does social work aiding refugee families
- 1976 Begins studies to become a psychoanalyst at the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis
- 1981 Recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations
- 1996 Awarded the Wallenberg Medal of the University of Michigan
- 2016 Dies in Washington, DC.



A postwar portrait of Dutch rescuer Marion Pritchard taken in 1988 in Vermont. (United States Holocaust

Memorial Museum, courtesy of
*Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the
Holocaust*)

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