

# WESTERBORK

and

an interview with its Commander Gemmecke  
in 1948

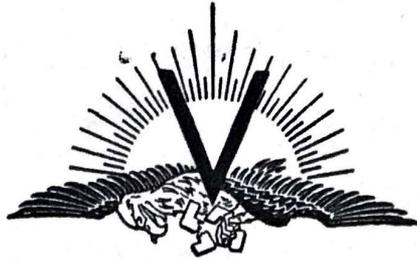


by M. Frankenhuis



1948

W. P. van Stockum en Zn.  
The Hague



WAR-COLLECTION FRANKENHUIS THE HAGUE  
(HOLLAND) 1939-1945  
1914-1918

# MY VISIT TO THE CAMP WESTERBORK

and

interview with ex-Commander Gemmecke  
detained in the Criminal Prison in Assen  
in 1948

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## **Visit to the camp Westerbork and to the ex-Commander Gemmecke on Thursday, 26th February 1948.**

To my request to visit Westerbork and also the ex-Commander of this camp, Gemmecke, I have received permission from the official authorities. The visit to Gemmecke has also connection with the accusations which I lodged against him through the Office or Department for War-criminals, concerning his actions and treatment during the time that I passed in Westerbork, as also before and after this period.

On the 25th February I arrive by car in Assen and take up my quarters in the hotel "Het Wapen van Drenthe". Opposite this hotel there is a road signpost: "Beilen 16 km". A melancholy feeling overcomes me, Beilen, Hooghalen, Westerbork, names of sadness, misery and horror.

Next morning, 26th February, at half past nine, I report myself at the Office for War-criminals, rested and strengthened for the heavy and difficult task of the coming day, when all the sad recollections and vicissitudes of life during the period of my incarceration will be vividly brought to mind again — and then the interview that I shall have with Gemmecke! The Chief-Guard or Sergeant Major of the State-Police, J. Schoenmaker, who has the case of Gemmecke in hand, assists me in every respect and provides me with all possible facilities. When I see him, he asks me: "First Gemmecke and then Westerbork?" It is all the same to me as I consider the one matter just as important as the other and thus leave the decision to him. Then he telephones to Westerbork. The Commander is not present as he is at that moment

in the camp and the adjutant-Commander, who answers the 'phone, is informed that permission has been obtained from the Commander that I may visit the camp, and so we were coming along. We make a detour and ride first to the little station Hooghalen, the spot where our train arrived on the 21st April, 1944. Everybody had to get out here, the men were relieved of their hand-cuffs and we were transported further to Westerbork in goods-waggons. Hooghalen was the place where, also before that time, all trains with prisoners destined for Westerbork, were directed. A nasty feeling of gloominess and depression overmasters me by the recollection of this day and the smallest details come once again to my mind. In the train from The Hague to this little station, where you were handcuffed to another like criminals and your youngest daughter had to pull your handkerchief out of your trouser-pocket to wipe your nose or to wipe away your tears from your centimeterlong beard, which had grown during your detention in the Schevening Criminal Prison!

The signalman serves as guide and gives us a few more details. At that time all Jews were brought to this place, to be transported farther to Westerbork, either by goods-waggons or on foot. About a hundred of us were pushed into two trucks, to which was coupled another waggon for our luggage and three German SS-ers took up their positions with double barrelled-guns pointing at us. Under these conditions we made the 6 km journey to Westerbork. And now we are doing the same trip along a narrow winding road, skirting the railway-line and soon pass over a level-crossing. Suddenly I perceive in the distance a clump of trees, above which the look-out towers of Westerbork are to be seen and I also recognize the tall chimney of the boiler-house — Westerbork! The same Westerbork, where we spent six long months — that hateful name which was pronounced thousands of times and with which was associated the most sad and bitter recollections for

all Jews. There is the same barrier, which we had to pass in those awful days. A soldier armed with a gun inspects the military permit of Mr. Schoenmaker and a note is made of my own name and also the name of the car-driver. Now we are on neutral ground and get out here. I notice the barracks and there is Gemmecke's villa, opposite the Commandant's Office. I get a sensation as if I had never been away! Life suddenly goes back to four years ago and I live again the day that I arrived here with my family and about ten other boys and girls, O.D.-ers (Resistance movement persons) clothed in flowery-green overalls, paying their respects to the German Overlord!

In the former German "Kommandantur", now the office of the present Commandant, Mr. Schoenmaker and I must wait a few minutes in one of the side-rooms, till we are admitted to Captain Buyvoet's room. He asks me the reason I want to visit Westerbork and after giving him explanations I am granted permission to see everything in the company of Adj.-Commandant Dekker. I ask if I may also take photos. This is not allowed, except by permission of the official authorities, but on condition that I take no photos of persons and one or two more restrictions which I must respect, I am allowed to take a few snap-shots. We now get a pass-permit and leave the former "Kommandantur" and pass through the entrance of the camp about 40 meters farther on. Here we see an armed soldier on guard and then we enter the "Lager" (camp) proper and I find myself once again treading the same ground where I was shut up for so many months — this little piece of earth, on which so much suffering was endured.

To the left there stands the same barrack "Hauptmagasin", but now with a new board: "Hoofdmagazijn". It is really over-powering to see all this again and I stare at everything like a person in a dream! Then we pass along the mainstreet with all its different barracks, the same lane that we have

walked along so often. Next we pass the boiler-house and then I see the old "Lawa", but now without household articles, foodstuffs and flowers, which one could buy in the old days. Some changes have taken place since then, but in general the camp is in exactly the same condition as it was at that time; it strikes me however that there are more bushes and green shrubs and that the rails along the main road are gone. On the way we meet several of the internees and on enquiring it appears that most of them are Quislings, S.S.-ers, or members of the former "Landwacht" (rural police), about 1500 in all, among whom are about 50 to 60 women, most of whom are sick and are receiving hospital treatment. They all wear arm-bands, with the letters "GEV" on them. When we pass the prisoners, some of them stand to attention. What a difference with the years 1940—1945!!

The adj.-Commander asks me how and in what order I wish to see everything, so I naturally choose first the "S" (punishment) barrack No. 67, where we were detained during the first part of our stay in Westerbork. I notice first the barracks 67, 66 and 65 and also the barbed wire barrier and see that only the barrier near the entrance has been removed. And this is the place where I wandered about in prisoner's-garb, just like the criminals in Sing-Sing prison in America!

The door of 67 is locked, so that one can only gain entrance to this barrack by the side-door. We first pass through the wash-house of the women of the "S", then through a door of the women's section. Immediately afterwards I am standing on the spot where my wife and daughters slept all three in their two beds one above the other, without any sheets or blankets, covered only with their coats the first few weeks. It is a thrilling moment for me and I stand still, lost in thought for some time and then the following words flit through my mind:

"Blessed be Thou our God, King of the World, who art good and merciful to us."

"Blessed be Thou, our God, King of the World, who hath kept us alive and preserved us through all our tribulations till this moment".

"And blessed be the Almighty that He hath saved the lives of my children!"

But I must not lose control of myself and certainly not in the presence of my two escorts. So we pass along to the men's section, where I perceive that at the end, where my bed was, there now stands a cupboard, so that it is impossible to take a photo of it. So I take a snap-shot of the other iron bed-steads of former times. You shudder again when you remember that here lay 500 men at a certain period, the windows closed up with wooden planks, so that the whole place was air-tight as you sat listening to the roaring of allied 'planes above your head. In this section there are now about ten prisoners, in a filthy and dirty condition, their luggage grimy and littered about the place and when I must shift their baggage in order to take a snap-shot, a strange feeling of repulsion comes over me. After that I have a peep at the washhouse with its long zinc trough, above which a number of taps are arranged. In this shed, a few days after my arrival, my hair was clean-cropped like a criminal's, as I was classified as an "S" (punishment) case.

We now pass along through the whole camp to Nr. 107, which was formerly used for the dismantling of shot-down allied 'planes and approach the roll-call ground where the "S"-prisoners had to take part in the physical exercises of the S.S. on Sunday morning from 6—8 o'clock. Then we pass the well-known boilerhouse and via barracks 85 and 84 we come to the hospital section which is surrounded by sick-barracks. So I have a peep in here too, where I lay myself

for some time, but there are only two sickcases in it now. Standing on the same spot where I then lay, I recall that Nord lay next to me, the man who had just been arrested by the Germans, together with his daughter and son-in-law at his secret address and had been inflicted with a paralytic seizure. During the night he had taken poison, but was discovered in the early morning by the sick-orderlies and his stomach was pumped dry. However, he insisted through thick and thin that he had only taken a narcotic to help him to get to sleep.

We now go on and arrive at the bath-house, which is now nicely painted and looks well-kept. It is difficult to get a number of the prisoners to take a bath, which is compulsory once a week. Then I notice the potato-peeling shed and several other small houses, in each of which now lives a member of the campstaff with his family. Then we pass the former little café, which now serves as canteen for the staff. And at last, we visit the little theatre-hall, where at that time performances were given, almost as good as some of the plays in Paris and London, but the comfortable arm-chair of the former Commander was now missing.

After walking through the different barracks with the sad recollections connected with them and taking a few more snap-shots, the visit to the camp comes to an end and along the main-store or canteen, we pass through the narrow entrance, with the armed guard standing at attention, to the outer-world. Confronting us we see again the Commandant's Office and I take another look at Gemmecke's villa and the other wooden bungalows of his former German inferiors. Then finally, we have a last peep into the small waiting-room, where we were first brought when Mrs. Rita Boyenk succeeded in paying us a first visit by penetrating into the interior of the lion's den in those days and it is thanks to the heroic conduct of this lady that we are still in the land of

the living! What a sensation to see once again that same little anti-room in the Commandant's Office, where we were prisoners at that time.

After having thanked the Commander for all his help and co-operation, we return to Assen. At 2.30 we are back again at the office of Mr Schoenmaker and I now show him a list of seventy questions, which I had already prepared and which I want to put to Gemmecke. I tell him that if there are any questions which, in his opinion, are not permissible, these can of course, fall out. Mr. Schoenmaker does not think that I shall be able to finish my task in one day, but I am allowed, if needs be, to continue my interview with Gemmecke the following day. Mr. Schoenmaker then advises me to let questions No. 69 and 70 drop out, as these have no direct connection with Gemmecke himself, but with other camps, so these two questions will be cancelled. Then I ask Mr. Schoenmaker if I must interrogate Gemmecke in Dutch or in German. After some consideration Mr. Schoenmaker thinks it wiser that he puts the questions, to which Gemmecke as usual, will answer in German. If necessary, I may then make further comments as the interview proceeds. Mr. Schoenmaker then informs me that Gemmecke, pending his trial, is shut up in the prison about 100 meters away and is dressed in prisoner's garb. We can meet him in the prison itself maybe, but Mr. Schoenmaker considers it better that the interview takes place here in his office. Meanwhile he telephones to a police-officer to fetch Gemmecke and sends written instructions to the Governor of the prison. Then we chat a bit together, but Mr. Schoenmaker soon draws my attention to the fact that Gemmecke is approaching. I look through the window and escorted by a policeman I see Gemmecke heading for the Office. He is bare-headed and dressed in a sort of wind-jammer, trousers and wooden shoes. His carriage and deportment are still those of a German

military-man — only a German can walk in that way —. What a thrill! The big man Gemmecke of those days is now coming to me, and words fail me to express exactly what I feel at that moment! A few minutes later I hear him coming up the stairs, then he enters the office and greets us politely. Mr. Schoenmaker asks him if he recognises me, to which he answers "No" in German. Mr. Schoenmaker then goes on to inform him that I desire to put a number of questions to him concerning the period that he was commander of the Camp Westerbork. Gemmecke takes a seat on a chair near me. I sit behind the desk in order to make notes and then the interrogation begins.

1. *You were the former Commander of Westerbork?*

Yes.

2. *From and till what dates?*

13th October 1942—11th April 1945.

3. *Who appointed you?*

The Chief of the Security Police, Dr. Harster, The Hague.

4. *What important Nazi-leaders have you personally spoken to?*

He asks me whom I mean exactly, so I mention the names of Hitler, Goering, Goebbels and Julius Streicher. He says he has never met any of them. I ask him again what persons in superior positions he has indeed come into contact with. He answers Rauter and Seyss-Inquart he has seen two or three times, but never spoken to. He also saw Schmidt once in a theatre. I asked him if this was Chief Service leader and General Commissioner F. Schmidt, who died or was killed in 1943. He then answers in the affirmative.

5. *Have you ever had anything to do with Himmler?*

I only saw him once in the Hague when he held a speech there.

6. *Did you get instructions from elsewhere?*

I got my instructions from The Hague, from the Commanding Officer of the Security Police, Section IV (roman four), B 4, Stormtroopleader Zöpf.

7. *Did you often act on your own initiative?*

He asks me what I mean by this, so I clothe the question in another form: Did you often make your own decisions?, to which he answers that he got all his instructions as to what he had to do from Zöpf.

8. *Did you apply for this job yourself?*

"No" and he repeated this again in German: "Nein!"

9. *Were you appointed to this job?*

Yes.

10. *And by whom?*

By Commanding Officer Dr. Harster.

11. *You have also fought in Russia and received a special decoration for it?*

I never fought in Russia. The decoration I received was a "War-Service Cross", second class, and thereafter I received the "Sword". These distinctions were not meant for military achievements, but for "length of service". The "Sword" decoration was granted to me two years after my arrival in Holland. Many people who, at that time, rendered services to the customs, the Railways, etc., received such decorations.

14. *What other posts have you filled besides?*

In 1940, at the commencement of the "Blitzkrieg" I was occupied in Düsseldorf on the Staff-Council (Personalrat), after that at the "Aktenaufbau", "Abteilung IV" (Document Research Section, Department IV). Also in Depts I and II, where I had to arrange everything. On the 25th August 1940 I was summoned to the Hague till 22nd June, 1942.

Then I became Commander of "St. Michiels Gestel". — Here I interrupt him to ask by whom he was appointed there, to which query he answers "Also by Dr. Harster. From October 13th, 1942 I was Commander of Westerbork. The last weeks before the end of the war from 20th April, 1945, I was engaged at the Administration Office in Amsterdam".

15. *Were you also in other concentration-camps?*

Yes, in Vught. I made a round-tour there in order to see if there were any possibilities for industry. I visited the Jewish furriers' section, the ready-made clothing section of the women and girls and also the kitchen and the people who were busy sorting out beans. I was also interested in the diamond cutting and polishing section and the printing-press department. I visited Vught in the months of August and September 1943. I also went to see Amersfoort, this was after St. Michiels Gestel and before I took up my office in Westerbork.

16. *Did you know what happened to the Jews, which you sent away?*

No, only that foreign Jews went to Vittel in France. Auschwitz was a huge working-camp. Bergen-Belsen an exchange camp for those Jews who had foreign identity papers for Palestine, Paraguay, etc. Theresienstadt was a preference-camp.

So far I had retained a rather indifferent and aloof attitude, but when he spoke of Theresienstadt as a preference-camp, Auschwitz — big work-camp and Bergen-Belsen as an exchange camp, I sized the man up. — the same head as formerly. He looks just as well groomed as in those days, only his hair is not so long now and he does not wear gloves any more, his fingers are brown from peeling potatoes. He has a pronounced handsome face and is more like an Englishman than a German.

17. *Had you any idea as to what happened to the Jews?*

No!

18. *Don't you know that of the roughly 110.000 Jews, whom you sent away on transports, more than 100.000 were done to death?*

At this moment Mr. Schoenmaker interrupts me and says that, according to statistical details 100.440 persons were sent away from Westerbork. After some discussion it appears that the number mentioned by me of roughly 110.000 is the total number of Jews deported from Holland. The difference of about 10.000 represents those deported from other places in the Netherlands.

Then Gemmecke goes on to say that he had no idea at all what happened to the Jews. I ask him if he now knows that they were practically all murdered. He answers that: "from information I have since received I am now acquainted with that fact."

I again repeat that of the 110.000 Jews only 6.000 returned.

19. *At that time you handed a certain declaration to several people, running as follows:*

**Camp Commander's Office.**

To ..... Barrack .....

According to the arrangements made by the State-Commissioner with the representatives of the Evangelical Church, you will not be deported to the East.

Westerbork-camp, the .....

Camp Commander:

((signed) Gemmecke.

S.S.-Chief Storm-Troop Leader.

*Still you sent these people away on Sept. 4th, 1944?*

"That is not true!" he replies in German. Instead of Mr. Schoenmaker I now ask him the same question and again he insists that it is not true. I take out my documents and

put the document in question under his nose. He reads it and then considers for a moment. Then he remembers that he issued this declaration on the order of the Reichs-Commissioner Z. B. V. I ask him what Z. B. V. means. "For "special use" from Schmidt of The Hague", he answers.

— "And still you deported these people although you had issued a written declaration to the effect that they would not be sent away?" At this a dispute arises between Gemmecke and myself in connection with the following question:

20. *Was that not in contravention of the written promise and declaration?*

To this he replies that he had to carry out the instructions which he had received, but that these people were in any case not sent to the East. He then went on to explain that with the words "the East", Auschwitz was meant and these people were not sent to Auschwitz, but to Theresienstadt.

21. *Was this transport of September 4th, postponed on account of transport difficulties?*

He professes to know nothing about this. The question was put in connection with certain rumours, which were circulated later on and which inferred that efforts were made to cancel this transport. He admits that he knows that this train was held up a certain time near Assen and Zwolle, but presumed that this was caused by the difficulties with the railway-connections in Germany.

23. *Before the departure of this transport of 3.000 persons, you issued a declaration in which you wished the best for everybody and hoped that all of them would keep in good health and arrive safely. You expressed your regret that you were not able to provide passenger-trains to convey these people to Theresienstadt, only several goods-trucks were at your disposal to convey these people. The cattle-trucks were closed and sealed and were originally intended for 12 horses.*

I discussed this matter with him for a considerable time

and stressed the fact that he allowed 60 persons, among whom old persons and children to be stowed into one cattle-truck, baggage and all. Two full days and one night the journey lasted without light or fresh air and with only one loaf to eat.

Gemmecke then tried to defend himself by saying that he did all he could to provide passenger-trains, but this was impossible on account of the great difficulties of transport during the last phases of the war. The railway-authorities in Utrecht could not provide him with any other waggons and on the orders from The Hague he had to allow this transport to go through. He went on to say that at the beginning he could get wood to make benches, etc. but in 1944 this was no longer possible. I now reproach him that it was forbidden to remove the wooden bars, which were nailed over the ventilation holes and for some time we remain speechless at the thought of the inhuman manner of transporting 60 people, baggage and all in one cattle-truck with no ventilation!

Gemmecke then remarks that he had originally given orders to allow no more than 15 kilos of baggage per person, but with this transport the people were allowed to take all the baggage they had with them. I lose my patience at this and almost bark at him: "More than 60 persons in one cattletruck, originally intended for 12 horses! Do you call that human?"

But in spite of my violent outburst, he remains calm and controlled. He does not get excited in the least, just as little as he did formerly. He goes on to say that at the beginning he requisitioned special carriages from Westerbork to Auschwitz. Then Mr. Schoemaker suddenly takes out a large photo from his desk: "Westerbork-Auschwitz".

Gemmecke still insists that he did all he could to transport the people as comfortable as possible. In every waggon of