

A Shot in the Dark

In the 1930s, Germany's Adolph Hitler used anti-Semitism (hostility toward Jewish people) to unite the German people against those whom Hitler deemed the common German enemy. As the leader of the Nazi party, Hitler blamed the Jews for much of the country's long-standing problems. His "final solution" to the Jewish problem was genocide, the widespread and systematic extermination of an entire race. The execution of more than six million Jews by the Nazis in World War II makes this one of the darkest periods in human history.

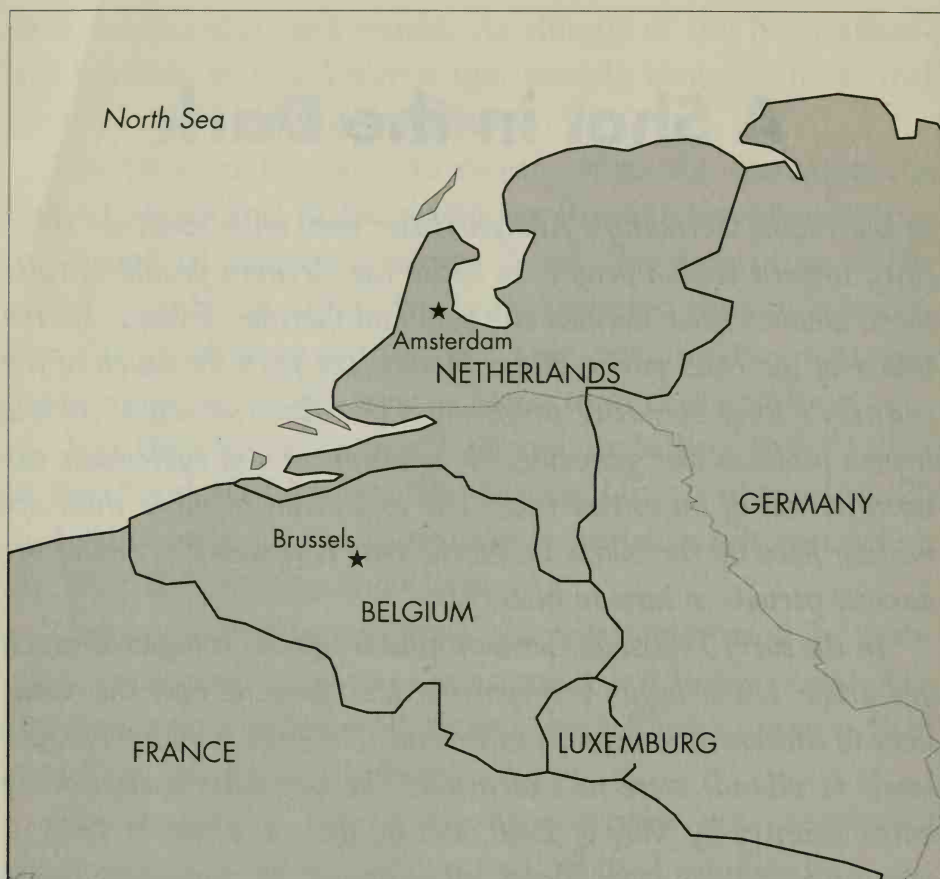
In the early 1940s, as German military forces conquered much of Europe, Hitler began transporting Jews from all over the continent to concentration camps in Poland. The Jews from the Netherlands (Holland) were no exception. The Germans occupied the entire country by May of 1940, and by the war's end in 1945, it was estimated that over 80 percent of the Jewish population in the Netherlands had been killed (about 115,000 out of 143,000 people).

There were few hiding places in this small, flat country and no easy escape routes, since the Netherlands was surrounded by Germany to the east, occupied Belgium to the south, and the North Sea to the north.

Many brave men and women of the Netherlands nevertheless risked their lives to help the Jews. Marion Van Binsbergen was one of them.

Marion Van Binsbergen

When twenty-three-year-old Marion Van Binsbergen heard the pounding on the door of her large country



Northern Europe

house, her pulse quickened, and her mind went numb with fear. It was late at night, and she had a pretty good idea who was standing on the other side of the front door—and why.

Immediately she thought about the children—five-year-old Lex, three-year-old Tom, and thirteen-month-old Erica—sleeping beneath the living room floorboards with their father. She wondered if they, too, had heard the banging and whether they were as frightened as she was.

Two more heavy knocks sounded from the front door, echoing like thunder through the quiet house.

Marion had grown fond of the Pollack family over the months, especially the children. But now it seemed that the worst of her fears had come true—the childrens' lives were in danger. She sat in the dark and listened to the sound of her heart beating against her chest.

Marion flashed back to an experience that she'd had over a year ago while in Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands. It was this incident that led to her decision to join the Resistance movement. She was riding a bicycle down a canal one afternoon when she heard screams and cries up ahead. As she approached the scene, she saw six or seven children standing in the street next to several German soldiers. The oldest child appeared to be around eight years old, the youngest, no more than two. The soldiers were loading the children into the back of an army truck. Those who resisted were grabbed by the hair and forced inside. Marion stood some twenty feet away, watching as the last child, the youngest, was hoisted aboard. The fear in the child's eyes made Marion shudder: She knew she was powerless to alter the children's unspeakable fate.

Like the vanishing image of the child in the truck, the memory of that horrible day had gradually faded from Marion's mind. But now it was back, as vivid as ever. Only this time the little girl on the back of the truck reaching out to Marion was young Erica Pollack.

Marion now sat motionless in bed, staring into the black as though searching for some distant light, a flash or flicker of hope.

Again there was the banging on the front door. She steeled herself and rose from her bed, the contours of the furniture now coming into grim focus.

The children's mother had died shortly after baby Erica was born. Their father, Freddie Pollack, had done his best to keep the family together, but soon after the Nazis arrived, news came that Jews were being deported from Holland. Freddie Pollack, himself a Jew, then sought out the help of the Dutch Resistance, an underground group that fought in secret against the German occupation. Freddie had heard that the Resistance often helped Jews hide or escape from the Germans. It was his only hope.

The woman Freddie met from the Resistance was a close friend of Marion Van Binsbergen, and she persuaded Marion to hide the Pollack family.

"Open the door or we'll break it open," a voice boomed in German.

Then another: "Open up, Miss Van Binsbergen. We know you're home!"

Wringing her hands, Marion moved slowly, robotically, out of her room and toward the front door.

Please let the children remain quiet, she thought, flicking on the hall light. *Please let them stay quiet*. The walk to the front door took forever.

"I'm sorry it took so long," she explained. "I must have been in a deep sleep."

Four German officers and a member of the Dutch Nazi party stood on the porch, staring at Marion inquisitively. She immediately noticed that the Germans were dressed in black, and her heart began to beat a little faster. These Germans were Secret Service, also known as the Gestapo, the most brutal and feared officers in the German military. It was common knowledge that those prisoners taken by the Gestapo rarely, if ever, returned.

The Dutch Nazi spoke first. "Are you hiding any Jews, Miss Van Binsbergen?" He was a small, heavysset man, with a thick mustache and a pug nose.

Marion ignored the lump in her throat and looked the man straight in the eyes. "Of course not," she insisted, lifting her head just perceptibly, as if in defiance.

The Dutch Nazi gave a smug look to his four colleagues and then stepped through the threshold of the front door. "Then I assume you won't mind my having a brief look around."

"No, not at all."

The four Germans never moved. They remained, as though chiseled from gleaming onyx, perfectly statuesque in their black uniforms—chins up, hands clasped behind their backs, their eyes focused dead straight ahead. Their stern, merciless presence was almost too much for Marion to bear.

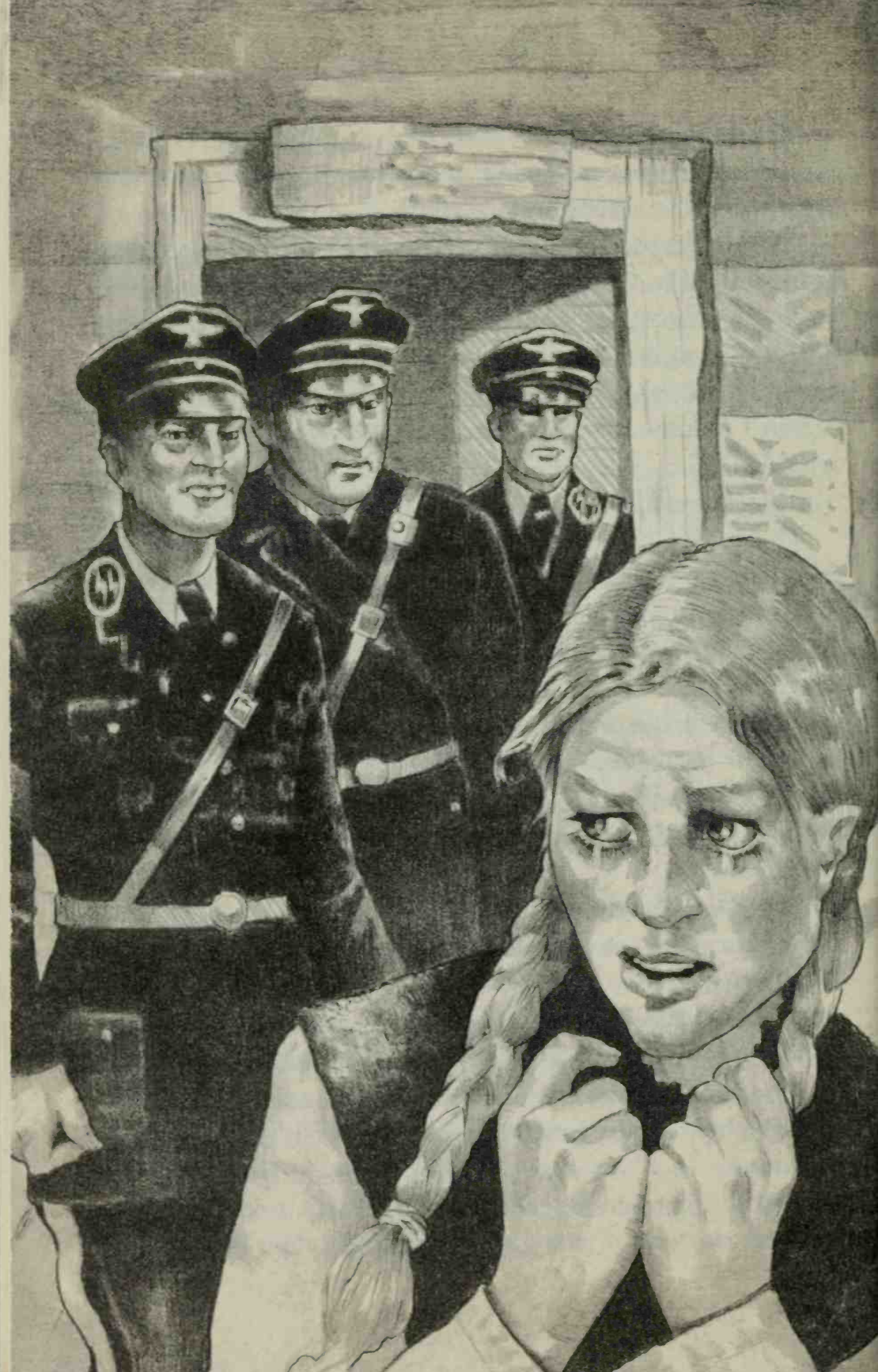
Marion stood on the front porch next to the SS officers and tried her best to appear calm. But she soon began to worry. What was that Dutch Nazi doing in there? Had he found the Pollacks? Several minutes went by before she had an answer.

"Miss Van Binsbergen?"

She turned to see the stout Dutch Nazi now standing in the doorway.

"No Jews here," he said.

When the Nazis finally left, Marion closed the door behind her and almost fell to the floor with relief. Moments later she heard baby Erica's muffled cries. "It's okay, kids," Marion said. "You can come out now." The Pollacks emerged from the secret trapdoor and immediately thanked Marion for what she had done on their behalf.



They were standing in the center of the living room, sobbing and holding on to one another, when the front door burst open, and the Dutch Nazi walked in.

"I thought so," he said, grinning broadly.

Marion and the Pollack family stood motionless, their terrified faces frozen as if captured in a still photograph. The Nazi closed the door and took several steps toward the group.

"We get so many Jews this way." He shook his head from side to side and smacked his lips. "Come with me."

"Please, they're only children," Marion pleaded.

"They're no concern of yours," the man snarled. He moved forward and grabbed Freddie Pollack by the arm. "My German brethren will be most interested to see all of you—including you, Miss Van Binsbergen."

The children began to sob, and Marion suddenly felt overcome by the moment. She imagined the children being hoisted into the back of an army truck, and suddenly the blood seemed to rush out of her legs. She had only one chance.

Moving with deliberate calm, she backed into a small table in which she kept a loaded pistol.

Summoning up every last shred of nerve, she opened the drawer, took out the pistol, and pointed it straight at the Nazi.

"Don't move!" she yelled.

The Nazi turned with a bemused look on his face. "Come, now, Miss Van Binsbergen. Give me the gun."

"If—if you take the children," she stammered, "you'll die."

"They're Jews," he said, coming slowly toward her,

one arm outstretched and beckoning for her to hand over the gun.

The gunshot wasn't as loud as Marion had imagined it would be. The Pollack family froze.

In his last few seconds alive on earth, the Nazi's dumb-founded expression never changed. He stood there, mid-stride, looking down at the blood that suffused the front of his uniform. He coughed twice and then fell to the floor, like a puppet suddenly released from its master's grip.

"I had no choice," Marion mumbled, looking down at the dead man by her feet, tears trickling down her cheeks. "I wish there had been some other way."

Freddie Pollack and his children then rushed to her side. But both Marion and Freddie knew they had no time to waste. Their work was not yet finished. They had to get rid of the Nazi's body before others came looking for him.

The children kept watch by the front window as Marion and Freddie wrapped the body in a blanket and took it down to the cellar. Marion then contacted the village undertaker, a man who happened to be a member of the Resistance, a man she could trust.

That same night the undertaker picked up the body and disposed of it by placing it in a coffin alongside another body.

By some stroke of luck, the Gestapo never traced the Dutch Nazi's disappearance back to Marion's house.

The Pollacks survived.

When the war finally ended in 1945, Marion Van Binsbergen said good-bye to the Pollack family. But they weren't the only Jewish family she helped. Through her efforts in hiding and placing Jews in safe homes, Marion Van

Binsbergen saved more than 150 Jews from certain death at the hands of the Nazis.

In 1947, Marion met and married an American named Tony Pritchard. They both now live in Vermont, where she is a practicing psychoanalyst. Baby Erica remained in Amsterdam and became a psychologist. She is the mother of three children. Marion visits her regularly.

Marion Van Binsbergen's story is told in the book *Rescuers* by Gay Block and Malka Drucker.

Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, Israel, recognizes non-Jews who took action to save lives during World War II. In 1983, Yad Vashem honored Marion Van Binsbergen-Pritchard as a rescuer who demonstrated moral courage during the Holocaust. She was presented with a bronze medal that is inscribed with the following words:

*"Whoever saves
a single life
is as one
who has saved
an entire world."*

ACE

At the beginning of World War II in the Pacific, the Japanese met with little resistance from the United States and its Allies. They quickly captured the British colonies of Singapore, Malaya, and Hong Kong in Southeast Asia, as well as American-controlled islands such as Guam, Wake, Corregidor, and the Philippines. The only bright note for America in the early days of the war was a successful bombing raid over Tokyo, Japan's capital, in April 1942.

By late spring of that year, the United States succeeded in breaking secret Japanese communication codes. An enemy plan to attack Midway Island, an important point in the Americans' line of defense and a gateway to the Hawaiian Islands, was discovered.

When the Japanese attacked Midway on June 4, 1942, the Americans were ready and waiting. Wave after wave of fighter planes attacked the Japanese fleet whose planes were still lined up on carrier decks waiting to take off. The United States routed the Japanese fleet and they retreated westward.

The Allies went on the offensive, and step by step retook Japanese-held islands and territories. In the Battle of the Philippine Sea in mid-1944, U.S. planes shot down more than three hundred Japanese fighters and sank three enemy carriers, losing less than thirty of their own aircraft.

The Battle of Midway was the turning point in the war in the Pacific and clearly proved the importance of air power in modern warfare. This successful air war against enemy forces was a key factor in the eventual defeat of the Japanese Empire.