

## Review

**Eddy de Wind:**

***Last stop Auschwitz:***

***My story of survival from within the camp***

**David Colmer (trans.)**

London: Doubleday, 2020. 261 p.

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**Daphne Geismar:**

***Invisible years: A family's collected account of separation  
and survival during the Holocaust in the Netherlands***

Boston: David R. Godine, 2020. 248 p.

ISBN 9781567926590

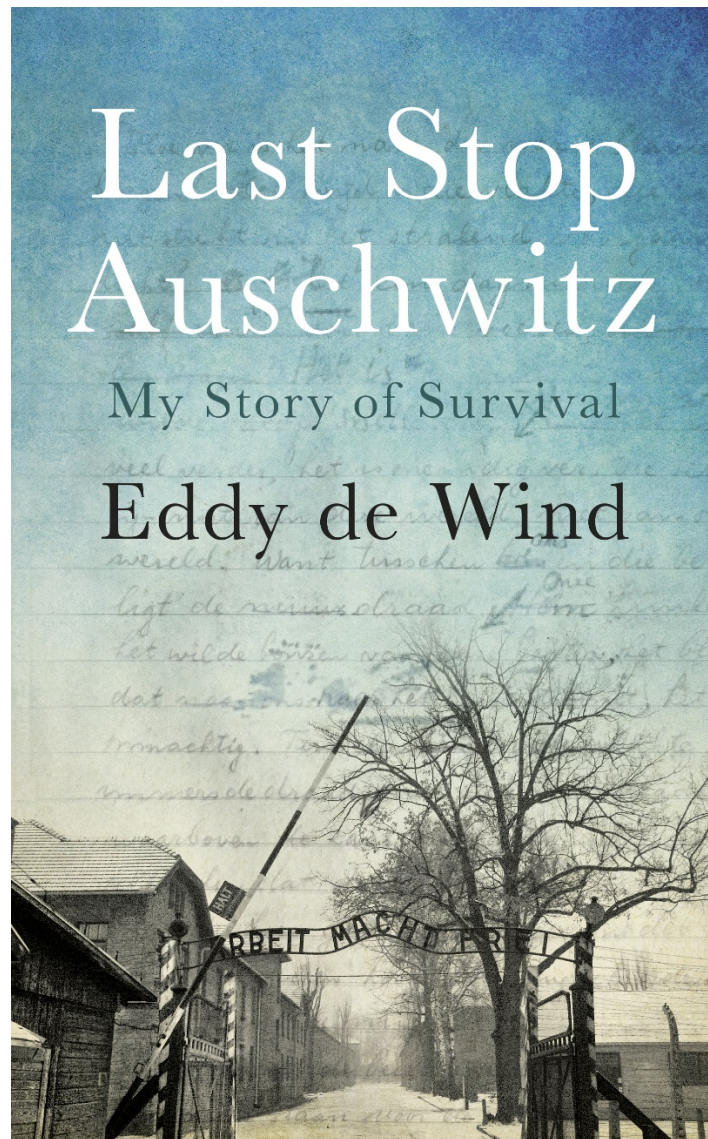
*Reviewed by Michiel Horn*

In a translator's note at the end of *Last stop Auschwitz*, David Colmer, one of the top Dutch-English translators working today, writes "how much of a shame it is that this book wasn't translated thirty or fifty or sixty years ago when the author could have been consulted [...]." Colmer is right. It is a shame for other reasons, too, not the least of which is that if it had been translated soon after World War II, this book probably would have had a large readership in the English-speaking world.

An informative "Note on the author and the text," written by members of Eliazar (Eddy) de Wind's family, describes him as the son of a prosperous, non-observant petit bourgeois family in Den Haag, where he was born in 1916. He was studying medicine at Leiden when the Germans invaded. De Wind was able to complete his studies with the help of his teachers, and he became the last Jewish student to get a medical degree from Leiden during World War II.

He went into hiding in Den Haag in 1942. An attempt to flee to Switzerland with his then fiancée failed, and sometime later in 1942 he volunteered to serve as a physician in Westerbork transit camp, on the understanding that his mother, who was already interned there, would not be deported. In fact, although De Wind

did not yet know this, she had already been sent to Auschwitz, where she was murdered on arrival. Eddy de Wind did his best to make a life of sorts in Westerbork. Having fallen in love with a German Jewish nurse nine years his junior, Frieda (Friedel) Komornik, he broke off his engagement to his fiancée and instead married Frieda in Westerbork. In spite of the assurances he had received from the Jewish Council before he went to Westerbork, he and his wife were deported to Auschwitz in September 1943.



He was still there when SS personnel abandoned the camp in January 1945. He and Friedel had both survived, but she was part of a group of inmates who were taken west in forced marches, away from the advancing Red Army. For the next few months De Wind had no idea what had become of his wife. He looked after the desperately sick people left behind by the guards and recorded his recollections of the harrowing sixteen months he had spent in Auschwitz, shaping them into a novel whose protagonist is a physician named Hans van Dam. Although it lacks the immediacy and barely controlled terror of the diary that David Koker kept in Vught (published in English under the title *At the edge of the abyss*), this novelistic memoir, written while De Wind was still in the camp, comes close. It was not affected by reading the accounts of others, whether in the form of memoirs or histories, which makes it a stunningly direct and effective portrayal of the horrors of Auschwitz. It also testifies to the capacity of people to love each other under the most difficult conditions.

The impact of the book is augmented by the addition of "Confrontation with death," an essay that De Wind wrote in 1949. Appearing in Dutch in that year, it was published in an edited English translation in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* in 1968. It is a key contribution to the study of concentration-camp syndrome. War-related traumas, in fact, were at the centre of De Wind's psychoanalytical practice until his death in 1987.

De Wind returned to the Netherlands in July 1945 and was soon afterwards reunited with his beloved Friedel. However, the traumas from which they were both suffering undermined their marriage and they divorced in 1957. De Wind then married a non-Jewish woman, with whom he had three children (his marriage with Friedel had been childless). Some members of the Jewish community saw his second marriage as a betrayal and, sadly, stopped speaking to him. He continued in his practice, and in time extended it to the children of people suffering from war trauma. He had suffered much, but he was able to help others.

*Last stop Auschwitz* was first published in its original Dutch in early 1946, but because the publisher went bankrupt soon afterward, the book reached merely a small audience. Only in 1980 did the book make a second appearance with the Van Gennep publishing house and although it enjoyed some success, it did not remain in print. The English translation had to wait another forty years.

Unless readers of this book know German, they will need to make frequent use of an eight-page glossary, Colmer having decided it was better on the whole not to translate the German terms De Wind used. The biographical note supplied by members of De Wind's family is very valuable, but readers can safely skip the afterword by the novelist John Boyne, which adds little or nothing to De Wind's story.



The compiler is the granddaughter of Erwin and Grete Geismar, who had moved to Amsterdam in the 1920s, and Chaim and Fifi de Zoete-Polak. The De Zoete family occupies the largest space in this book, because five of the stories are told by and about them, the parents and their three daughters, Mirjam (Daphne's mother), Judith and Hadassah. Other principals are Erwin Geismar, who was apprehended while in hiding in 1943 and murdered in Auschwitz later that year; his son David, who later married Mirjam; Nathan Cohen, who married Judith; and Zigi Mandel, a Polish Holocaust survivor who married Hadassah in Israel. Some of the material is reproduced from letters and diaries, most notably one that Erwin briefly kept in 1943, but the majority of it is drawn from interviews with the principals and on occasion with fellow survivors or helpers.

After German forces invaded the Netherlands in May 1940, Jews, both Dutch and pre-war refugees from Germany and Austria, were increasingly penalized and isolated from the rest of Dutch society. In April 1942, all Jews over the age of six were ordered to wear a yellow Star of David, and by July successive groups of Jews were required to report for eventual transport to "work camps" in the East, passing through Westerbork. (Newly constructed in early 1943, a concentration camp at Vught had an auxiliary function as a transit camp.) Although it was not yet known what was happening in these eastern camps, and few Netherlands, Jewish or gentile, were as yet able to gauge the full extent of Nazi hatred and depravity, thousands of Jews decided to avoid deportation and sought hiding places, for themselves but even more for their children. After all, what would they do in work camps? They became *onderduikers* ('people in hiding'), that splendidly evocative word for which no English translation really suffices.

The recollections gathered in Geismar's book capture the anguish felt by parents as they parted from their children, not knowing when, if ever, they would see them again. (As a rule, children were hidden separately; the family of Nathan Cohen, who hid with a policeman and his family in a small community in Gelderland, was an exception, as was Anne Frank's family.) It captures even more eloquently the confusion and anxiety felt by children who were separated from their parents, and the difficulties they underwent in hiding. Some of the illegal foster parents were warmly welcoming, others less so. The motives – Christian charity, humanist empathy, common decency (not nearly as common as it should have been), hostility to the occupiers, need for the financial compensation that came with hiding people – varied, as did personalities. And the entire experience played out against a background of the ever-present possibility of capture in a *razzia*, a police raid, or through betrayal, sometimes on ideological grounds, often for financial gain. In order to minimize the danger of detection – fatal to those who were hiding, dangerous to those hiding them – *onderduikers* were moved from refuge to refuge at irregular intervals. This was particularly disturbing to

children, who were apt to think that the family they were leaving behind wanted to be rid of them. (I have spoken with someone who as a teenaged *onderduiker* stayed with several families and found the successive separations very stressful.)

All five members of the De Zoete family survived the war and were reunited; the Cohens survived as well. But David Geismar lost his father, and all of them lost close relatives as well as many friends and acquaintances. One page lists the names of 61 family members who died during the Holocaust, the great majority of them murdered in Auschwitz and Sobibor. The list forms a grim background to the stories of the survivors. Moreover, the anxieties that afflicted the survivors while they were hiding left their mark on post-war lives, variously lived in the Netherlands, Israel, and the United States. Daphne Geismar deserves high praise for putting together this splendid book, so that those of us who have never had to undergo the experiences described can get some sense of what they were like. Together, these two books form a welcome and important addition to our knowledge of the Dutch experience of the Holocaust.

### **About the reviewer**

Michiel Horn is professor emeritus of history at Glendon College, York University (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), and past president of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies (CAANS). Among his publications is the translation, with John Irons, of *Dagboek geschreven in Vught* by David Koker. Edited by Robert Jan van Pelt, it appeared in English as *At the edge of the abyss: A concentration camp diary 1943-1944* (Northwestern University Press, 2012).