

## House of Memories



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*Uncovering the Past of a Dutch Jewish Family*

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Zuidelijk  
Historisch  
Contact

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In Memory of

Bertram Polak (Tilburg 1918-Auschwitz-Birkenau 1942)  
Franz Robert Spier (Düsseldorf 1913-Auschwitz-Birkenau 1942)  
Justine Leonie Spier-Bendien ('s-Gravenhage 1920-Mauthausen 1945)  
Alfred Samuel de Wit (Amsterdam 1911-Auschwitz 1942)

And of

Florentine Piel-Polak (1921-2011)  
Edith D. Spitz-Polak (1921-2015)

Ernst Elzas (1919-2010)  
Wies Wouters-de Rooij (1922-2014)  
Peter Versluys (1938-2015)  
Marianne C. van der Plas (1921-2015)

Of my dear friend  
Theun-Gerrit Kateman (1962-2011)

And of my relatives  
René Manders (1956-2011)  
Dré Bijsterveld (1938-2012)  
Bep Harbers-Schlatmann (1923-2012)  
Annie Kampers-van Ratingen (1937-2012)  
Dora Bijsterveld (1929-2013)

*May their memory be a blessing*

זכרונם לברכה

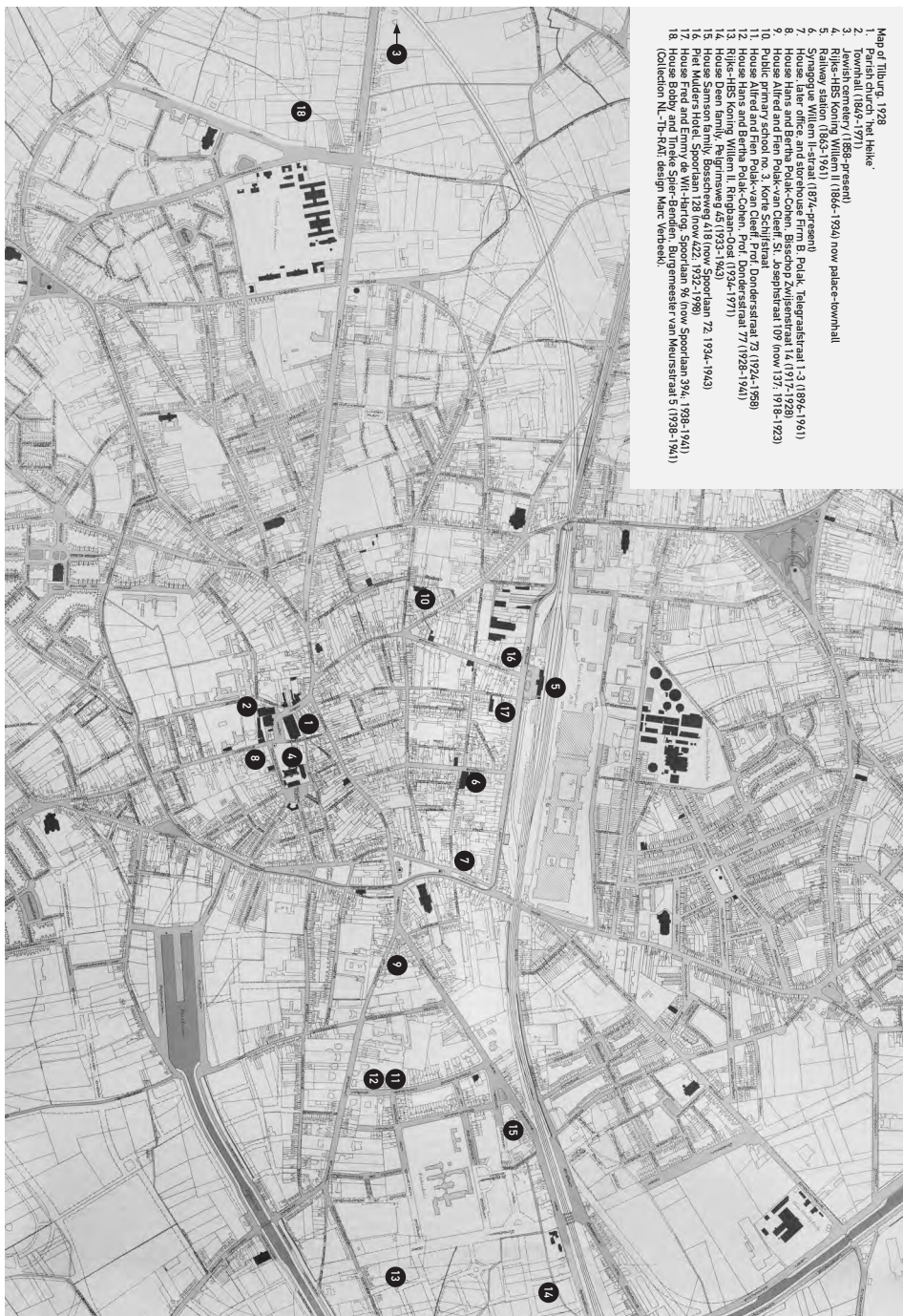
I did and do believe ... that ... if you look for things, if you search, you will, by the very act of searching, make something happen that would not otherwise have happened, you will find something, even something small, something that will certainly be more than if you hadn't gone looking in the first place ... There are no miracles, no magical coincidences. There is only looking, and finally seeing, what was always there. ...

For everything, in time, gets lost: the lives of peoples now remote, the tantalizing yet ultimately vanished and largely unknowable lives of virtually all ... who ever lived ... But for a little while some of that can be rescued, if only ... somebody makes the decision to look back, to have one last look, to search for a while in the debris of the past and to see not only what was lost but what there still is to be found.

Brief excerpts from pp. 486-487 from *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* by Daniel Mendelsohn. Copyright © 2006 by Daniel Mendelsohn. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

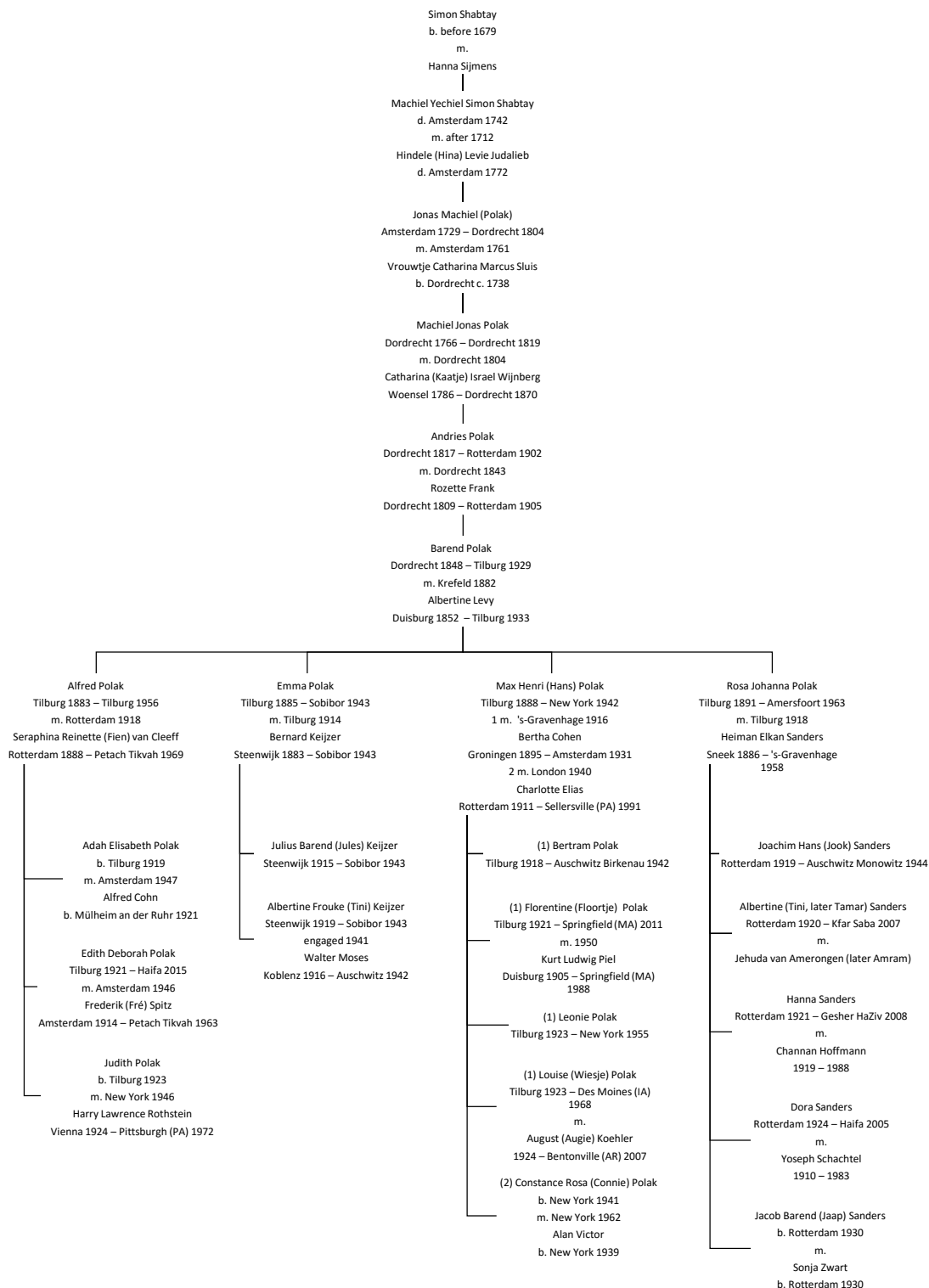
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Map of Tilburg, 1928 (NL-TbRat; Design Marc Verbeek).





Family tree 1. The Polak family between the seventeenth and the twenty-first century (Design Jardena Gil).



III. o.1 The house on Prof. Dondersstraat 77 in Tilburg, 2014. Photo Jardena Gil, as included in her artwork *Double Portrait*, 2014.

# Prologue: A House, a Family, a Tragic History

The story of this book begins and ends with a grand and spacious house, situated on a beautiful street in the Dutch town of Tilburg. Tilburg is a medium-sized town in the southern part of the Netherlands and with some 212,000 inhabitants in 2015, it is the sixth-largest town in the country. In the summer of 2000, my spouse Hans Harbers, then 41 years old, and I, 38 at the time, began looking for a house in Tilburg because we had decided to move there from our previous hometown of Nijmegen. I had just started a new job as a history professor at Tilburg University and although having been trained as a medievalist, I was now engaged in a new challenge: promoting the research of regional history and practising public history. Hans was to start as an anaesthesiologist in one of Tilburg's two hospitals later that year. On 17 July 2000, we visited the house on Prof. Dondersstraat 77 for the first time as potential buyers and we were immediately thrilled with it. Little did we know about its history, then.

After we had come to an agreement to buy the house in August 2000, we started preparations for the house's badly needed refurbishment. It was then that I found out that the house had been built by a certain Max Henri Polak in 1927-1928. I was immediately struck by the name Polak, as it is one of the most common Jewish names in the Netherlands. Instantly, I realized that a possibly tragic history might be connected with the house we had just bought. Yet, although a historian, I had no clue how to find out what this history might be. After all, I was more familiar with the Middle Ages and this was a new field of research for me.

We moved into the house in February 2001, and now, fifteen years later, I know so much more. After years of searching, I figured out what became of the Polak family that came to live here in early 1928. I discovered how the house later served as a home to a series of families, including a German couple that lived here between 1941 and 1944. I also learnt about the domestic staff that served here and the house's occasional tenants. For example, after Tilburg's liberation in 1944-1945, it housed the mess room of the local staff of the Military Authority (MG).<sup>1</sup> This house serves as the setting for the history related here. It embodies the life stories of all those who lived here – and loved the place, I am sure.

First and foremost among those is the Polak family, the Jewish family that stands at the heart of this book. One tragic personal story stands out: the story of Bertram, the son of Max Henri (Hans) Polak (1888-1942) and Bertha Polak-Cohen (1895-1931), the couple that

<sup>1</sup> For the meaning of the abbreviations used throughout this book, see the list of abbreviations at the end of this book. On behalf of the Dutch government in London, the MG carried out the administration of those parts of the Netherlands that had been liberated in 1944.

had the house built. Bertram came to live here as a nine-year-old with his parents and his three younger sisters in 1928. Thirteen years later, under German occupation, at the age of 23, he was forced to leave the house in June 1941.

Bertram is also the main protagonist of this book. It tells the story of Bertram's family, from their arrival in the industrial boomtown Tilburg in 1878 until the moment most of them managed to escape after the German army invaded the Netherlands in May 1940. Bertram was the only one to stay behind. Due to a wealth of information, we can follow his life as a son, a secondary school student, a soldier, a businessman, and a friend. Most poignantly, we are able to follow his trials and tribulations after the fateful invasion in May 1940. A year and a half later, he tried to escape to England with three friends, was betrayed, arrested, and taken to prisons and camps. He was killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau on 17 August 1942. As his fate was linked to that of his friends Fred de Wit and Bobby and Tineke Spier-Bendien, their story is told here too.

Besides being a story about these four victims of the Holocaust, however, this book is also about the survival of so many of their relatives, who were able to turn 'tragedy into triumph', as Bertram's half-sister Constance put it. This book also tells the story of how Bertram's relatives fared after the war and how, despite the indelible scars they incurred as a result of the murder of so many loved ones, they showed resilience and determination to make something great of their lives. These family members raised children who studied and did well, and devoted their minds and hands to developing new homes in Israel or the United States, and, more than anything else, fostered a very close family bond.

On 29 April 2011, three generations of the Polak family, those who had escaped the Holocaust and their descendants, thirty people in all, returned to this house for the first time after more than seventy years. They came to meet one another and to commemorate Bertram, their brother, cousin, and uncle. They laid a stumbling stone bearing his name, a symbol of the family's shared commemoration (ill. 0.2).<sup>2</sup> After all these years, this was the first time they were able to share their memories of both happy and sad events, and it left nobody untouched, including me. After this occasion, filmmakers Carine van Vugt and Jeroen Neus produced the documentary film *Here was Bertram* (ill. 0.3). This film documents my search and its impact on those who carry the legacy of the past. After its completion in 2012, the film helped widen the circle of people touched by the story.<sup>3</sup>

### **Why Another Book?**

Innumerable books have been published in recent years that tell the individual stories or family histories of one or more Holocaust victims or survivors.<sup>4</sup> So the question remains, why then another one? This is the question I needed to answer for myself before I started writing. Every victim's story deserves to be told, of course, for the direct descendants and relatives in the first place. This is also the primary purpose I had in mind when writing this book. Indeed, with this book, my aim was to reconstruct, tell, and share the story of Bertram Polak and his friends. Not only that, but also to reveal the impact of this story on their living relatives as well as in wider circles.

It is exactly this kind of 'microhistory of the Holocaust', focusing on individual and family histories, which has gained a great deal of academic interest lately as well as pub-



III. o.2 Laying of the stumbling stone for Bertram Polak, Tilburg, 29 April 2011. Photo Marc Verbeek.

lic attention.<sup>5</sup> Today, countless people are searching for ways to experience something of what happened as a way to empathize with the victims' fates. Dutch historian Frank van Vree observed that '[i]n our society, which lacks guiding meta-stories, the individual story seems to be the last reliable source of identity and morality.'<sup>6</sup> It is along these same lines that the story told in this book creates a meaning of the past that then contributes to people's sense of identity, both in time and in place.

Even so, this book is one of countless similar ones that have come out in recent years, several of which I am indebted to. Above all, there is Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost* of 2006, which I read in 2011, at a point when I still was at a loss about what I had set in motion by starting my search for Bertram Polak.<sup>7</sup> Like me, Mendelsohn started out as the scientific researcher he is, trying to establish facts and figures, in his case about

2 For these small commemorative plaques, designed by the German artist Gunter Demnig, see [www.stolpersteine.eu](http://www.stolpersteine.eu), accessed 4 November 2014.

3 Van Vugt and Neus, *Here was Bertram*. Versions in Dutch, English, and Hebrew were made available on DVD and YouTube, distributed to museum and memorial sites in the Netherlands, the United States, and Israel, and shown to audiences in various countries in Europa and in Israel as well as to my students at Tilburg University.

4 I only mention three recent Dutch books which tell similar histories: Kok and Michielsen, *De redding van de familie Van Cleeff* (2015), about a family from Rotterdam distantly related to the Polak family; Willems and Verbeek, *Hier woonden zij* (2015), reconstructing the lives of the Jewish families living in one neighbourhood in Scheveningen; and Schumacher, *Mau en Certy* (2016), about a couple that escaped from Nazi Germany and Austria to Amsterdam and survived Bergen-Belsen.

5 See, for instance, Zalc et al., *Pour une microhistoire de la Shoah* and the various contributions on family history in this volume; Van Vree, 'Auschwitz and the Origins of Contemporary Historical Culture'; Van der Laarse, *De Oorlog als beleving*; Bijsterveld, 'Herdenken blijft een opgave'; Bijsterveld, 'Herinnering in verandering'.

6 Van Vree, 'Auschwitz and the Origins of Contemporary Historical Culture', 217.

7 Mendelsohn, *The Lost*. This powerful book equally inspired Willems and Verbeek, *Hier woonden wij*, 345.



III. 0.3 DVD box cover of the film *Here was Bertram*, produced by Carine van Vugt and Jeroen Neus. Design Carine van Vugt/Stichting Verhalis, 2012.

the fate of six of his relatives who perished in the Holocaust in what was then the Polish *shtetl* of Bolechów (now Bolhekhiv in Ukraine), where only 48 of the some 3,000 Jews living there in 1940 survived.<sup>8</sup> Just like him, I discovered that the heart of the matter is not in the so-called historical facts but in the details of people's lives, from childhood anecdotes to daily pursuits, details that are vital to revive at least something of their personal traits and characteristics.

Every story has its own unique elements that make it stand out. In this story, one distinctive element might be the sheer volume of memories, pictures, and documents that, to everybody's astonishment, happened to be preserved after all. These broke the silence that had surrounded Bertram's memory for so many years. This wealth of information enables us to follow the intimate family and personal life of Bertram Polak and his relatives. Much attention will be paid to the places where the family lived its life, ran its business, went to school, and where the ensuing

tragedy unfolded. Since this history focuses on a specific house in a particular town, it creates a sense of place, which grows from identifying oneself with a particular spot or landscape.

We need a wider context to frame the anecdotal and the personal. It is exactly the interwovenness of individual and collective behaviour that determined Bertram's and his friends' fate and so I also sketched the bigger picture to gain a better understanding of this history as it occurred. The narrative paints a vivid picture of one of the many small communities in the so-called *mediene*, the provincial Jewry outside the Jewish metropolis that was Amsterdam, where some 60 per cent of all Jews in the Netherlands lived.

By combining personal and local circumstances I was able to concentrate on the specific position of the Jewish population in a Dutch town such as Tilburg. What may have determined their conscious and unconscious choices, made willingly or under coercion? How did people support each other? Why did one person decide to try to escape or go into hiding, and why did another report for a labour camp? What opportunities were offered by the non-Jewish population? What social networks and contacts could the persecuted Jews resort to?

What we learn from accounts like this one is that factors such as relative wealth, the degree of integration, overtness of relations and mutual support in a religiously segmented town, family relations, business contacts with non-Jews, and the relative proximity of the countryside played a decisive role. It is only at the micro-level that factors such as these can be surveyed and assessed.