

A Statue for Truus Wijsmuller-Meijer in Alkmaar, the Netherlands

by Leen Spaans, president of the committee "Statue for Truus"



The statue for Truus Wijsmuller-Meijer with 28 children and the sculpturers

Introduction

Truus Wijsmuller-Meijer (1896-1978) was a Dutch war-heroine. She was wellknown during her lifetime. But after her death she was forgotten soon. The publication of the Dutch novell "Sara, The Girl Who Went on a Transport" (Lody Trap, 2017) let Truus return in our memory. It inspired the City Council of Alkmaar to a statue. The Historical Society of Alkmaar was asked to organize the realisation and the crowdfunding. The project "Statue for Truus" includes an educational programm for the schools in the Alkmaar area, the publication of a special newspaper about Truus and her statue and a temporarily museum. The statue wil be revealed autumn 2020. The other parts of the project start april 2021 in Alkmaar. This article tells the story of Truus Wijsmuller and the making of her statue.

Youth, Alkmaar, Amsterdam, practical feminism

Truus Meijer was born on April 21, 1896 at Mient nr. 14 in Alkmaar. She came from a progressive-Protestant family. Her father was a pharmacist with a drugstore, her mother a seamstress and active in politics. She followed a three-year commercial course in her hometown. Her Alkmaar teachers didn't have high expectations of her: "Geertruida Meijer is a desperate case, in spite of being diligent." Because her parents moved to Duivendrecht in 1913, a suburb of Amsterdam, she had to complete the course in Amsterdam. She went to work at a bank, and there she met her future husband, Joop Wijsmuller. In 1922 they married and moved into a house at Nassaukade 125 in Amsterdam.

		
Mient 14, Alkmaar, nowadays a restaurant	Truus Meijer	Joop Wijsmuller

The young couple had no children. Truus focussed on social work and sat on various boards. The threat of war made itself felt in 1938. Truus started the Women's Volunteer Corps with friends. Should a war start, the women could support the men with all kinds of help. The women who joined were expected to show "Absolute willingness to perform even the humblest of services, if the leadership deems it necessary" according tot the Corps. That attitude of servitude was certainly true of Truus. Since 1933 she often rescued refugee children from Germany and the border regions. If people were in need, one could always rely on Truus.

Help for the Jewish Children in Germany

From 1933 on, once Hitler had come to power in Germany, Jewish people tried to get out of the country. Germany was slowly but surely becoming unliveable for them. More and more parents looked abroad for help for their children, also to the Netherlands. As long as they were brought to safety. Truus got involved in this through Jewish friends. In 1938 she smuggled a group of children out of Hamburg under dangerous circumstances. She was lucky: Princess Juliana and Princess Beatrix turned out to be on the train in the car next to hers. Truus made clever use of that to call the bluff of the difficult Dutch border officials: she simply wanted to be let through.



Prinses Juliana and the baby, prinses Beatrix

Kristallnacht; how did The Netherlands respond?

After the Kristallnacht of November 9-10, 1938, the Jews in Germany and Austria were no longer certain of their lives. Especially in Austria, the Nazis went to great lengths. That terrible night, 1,500 people were killed, 1,000 synagogues went up in flames, and 10,000 shops were looted and destroyed. 30,000 men and boys were sent to concentration camps. Jewish aid committees in Europe cried out for help, at least for the children. England agreed to take in 10,000 children. The Germans went along with this, as long as they got paid for it and it didn't cost them any time or energy. The Children's transports got their start here, and Truus was a decisive factor in this.

The Netherlands wanted to maintain its neutrality. Allowing German refugees into the country was considered risky. In 1938, the government led by Prime Minister Colijn, closed our borders. Only children in dire need were still allowed in. There were already many Jewish refugees in our country.

They often lived in abject quarters. In August 1939, the government ordered the camp Westerbork to be built in Drenthe, near the German borders, for these Jewish refugees. When the Germans invaded The Netherlands in May 1940, they turned Westerbork into a concentration camp. And in 1942 they turned it into a transit camp on the way to the extermination camps. Truus provided food packages for the captured Jews in Westerbork. She even rescued a large number of babies from there.

Confrontation in Vienna

The English Jewish Auxiliary Committee asked Truus to go to Vienna after Kristallnacht. She had to ask the Nazis to allow 10,000 children to be sent to England. She negotiated this on December 5, 1938 with Adolf Eichmann, then an unknown character but later notorious as the "architect of the Holocaust." Truus was granted this permission, but under difficult terms, as if a humiliating game was being played with her: 600 children could leave on December 10, on the Sabbath, and had to be out of Germany by the next day (Sunday December 11). With the help of many others, Truus managed to organize this with lightening speed: which children go, which train, which boat. The first Children's transport was a fact.



Children's transports and boat refugees

Between December 1938 and September 1939, nearly 10,000 children were brought to England. The vast majority arrived by train in the Netherlands and boarded the boat at Hoek van Holland. Because England entered into war with Germany in September 1939, the transports had to stop. Otherwise, more children would have been saved. Sometimes children were able to remain in the Netherlands if they were ill or if they had no papers. Despair and happiness competed for precedence. These children were saved from the horrific incinerators. But they were also separated from their parents, who chose to entrust the most precious that they had to a stranger, Aunt Truus.

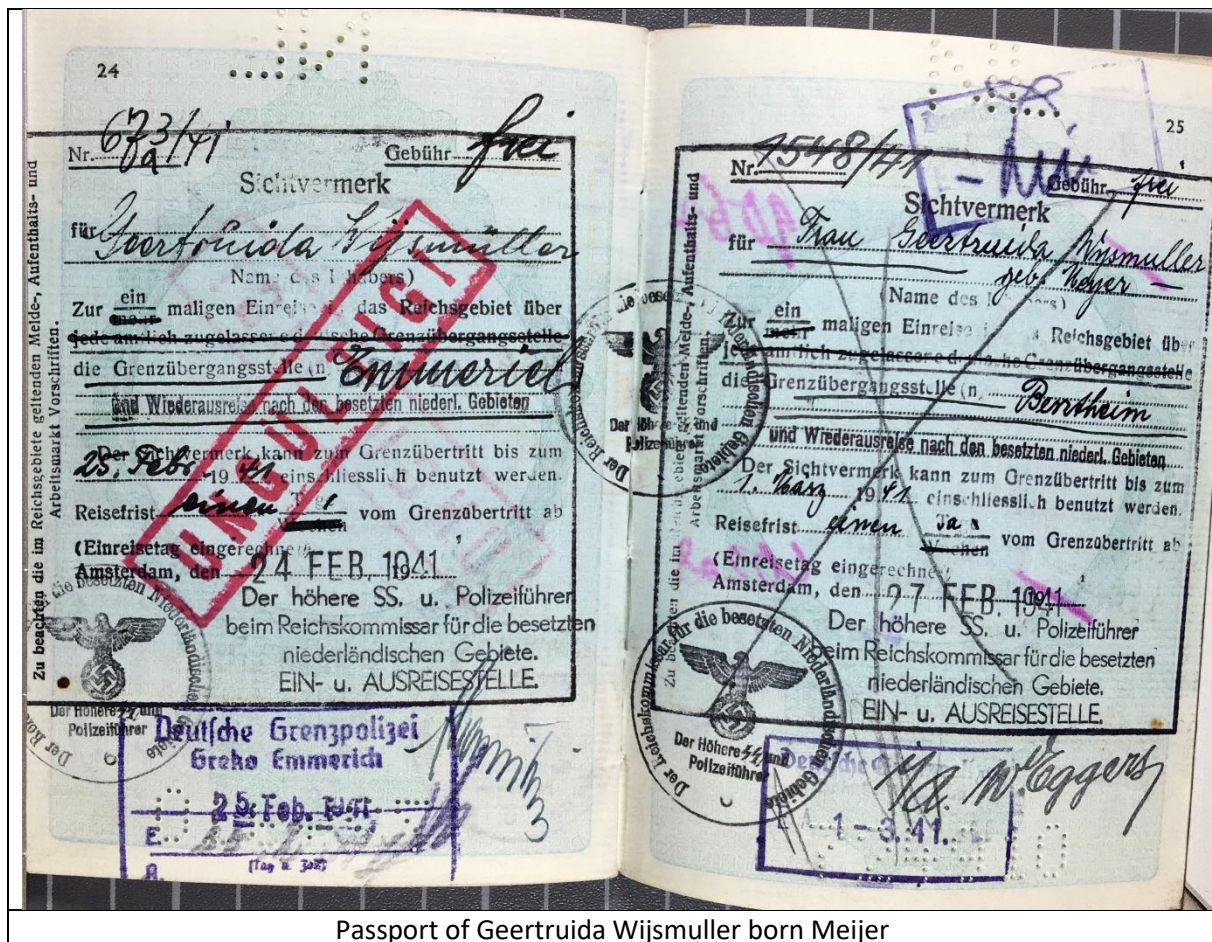
In May-June 1939, the St. Louis sailed from Hamburg to Cuba with 917 Jewish refugees. They were promised, after putting down a lot of money, that they could start a new future in Cuba. But they had been cheated. Their papers were false. The boat had to return when it turned out that people were also not welcome in America or Canada. The Germans demanded that the Jews return to Hamburg, where a certain death awaited them. The brave German captain refused and moored at Antwerp. The Netherlands and other countries welcomed the refugees. Truus rented a boat and brought them to Rotterdam.

Monuments to the Children's transports

The Children's transports remained unknown for a long time. Not much had been made known about it before the war. It was too risky for diplomatic relations. After the war, so many other horrible dramas became known that the fate of these children slipped into the background. These children experienced great fear and uncertainty. In most cases they lost their parents permanently. Only later did they realize that there had been strange people who cared about their fate, such as Aunt Truus. The film Truus's Children shows that. In London, Berlin, Hoek van Holland and now also in Alkmaar, monuments remind us of their lot.

Tours through Europe

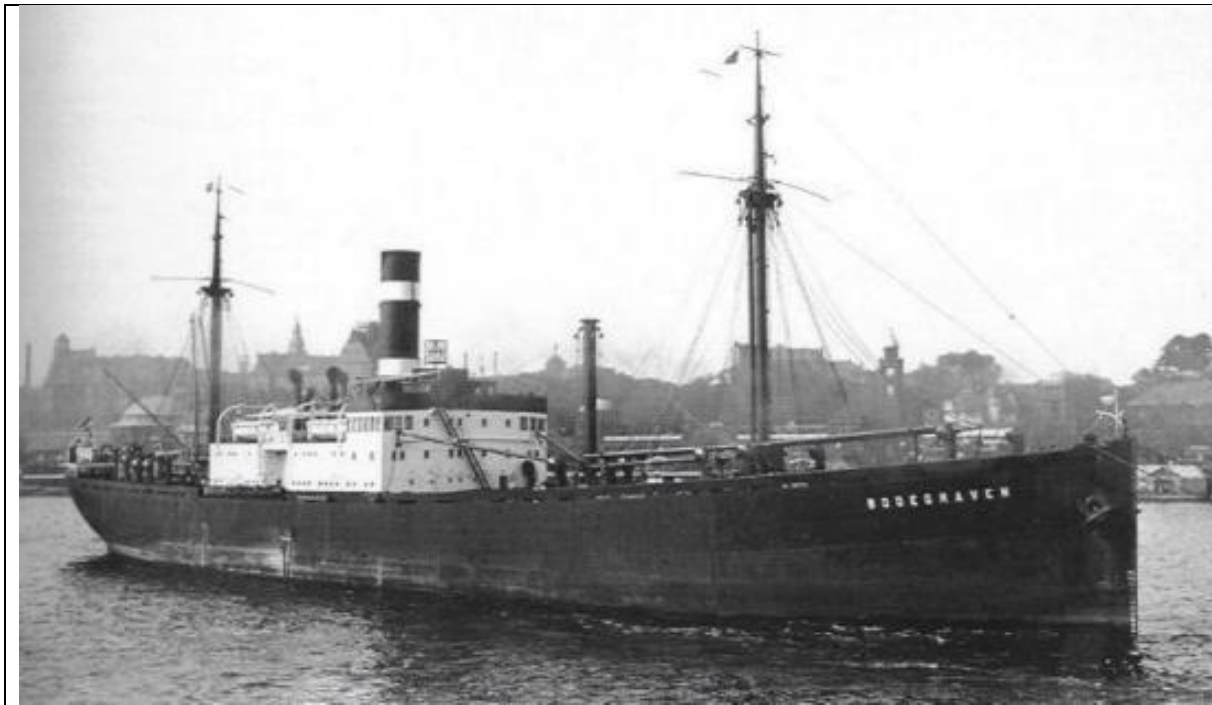
When the Children's transports had to stop in September 1939, because England declared war on Germany, Truus tried to save people through other means. She brought families and children to the borders of Spain and Italy. She collected refugees from Eastern Europe via Denmark and Sweden. She took medicine and food to prisoners of war camps. In The Netherlands she was always looking for families and homes for Jewish children stranded here. The stamps in her passport testify today to her many travels. She could always count upon the support of her husband, Joop, and the help of her maid, Cietje Hackmann.



Passport of Geertruida Wijsmuller born Meijer

Last Children's transport: May 14, 1940

During one of those trips, Truus was in Paris when Germany invaded The Netherlands. It was May 10, 1940. Truus had to go back to Amsterdam through the violence at the front, to bring the last Jewish children in the Burgerweeshuis to safety. It turned out to be a dangerous journey. On May 14, she brought the 66 children to IJmuiden in five rented busses. Jewish families were also allowed to come along, because there were places left. The last boat to leave was the Bodegraven, which was supposed to be sunk at the entrance to the harbor. Truus convinced the captain to flee out to sea. Barely in time. Ten minutes later, The Netherlands capitulated.



The last boat SS Bodegraven

During the war Truus worked with her friends in resistance groups, who mainly sent food to the victims in the concentration camps. Truus creatively saved 50 babies from death by arranging that they were not sent to Auschwitz but to Theresienstadt. At the request of the Germans, she travelled a few years more with Jews who were allowed to go to Spain. She did that upon the condition that she could also take Jewish children with her. During the Hunger Winter of 1945, she saved babies in Amsterdam by bringing them by ship to Enkhuizen, the 'retrievers'.

Truus after the war

After the liberation Truus was asked to become a member of the emergency city council of Amsterdam. During the first elections, she received the most 'preference votes.' She remained in politics for the VVD until 1966. She remained fully committed to social affairs, schools, and hospitals. "Steamroller" became her nickname. In 1957 she founded the Anne Frank House with Otto Frank, of which she remained a board member until shortly before her death. Her husband Joop died in 1964. Truus died in 1978. In her will she left her body to science. She received great honours during her life: a bust, and high (inter)national awards, including the Yad Vashem award.

Refugee children now

We have learned from Truus that one righteous, brave woman can save the lives of thousands of young people. Since Truus's rescue work, there have been new hot spots in the world, with children being the most vulnerable victims: in the drama in Syria, in Yemen, and in other countries in the Middle East and Africa. World conflicts are complicated, dangerous and unpredictable. They happen. May there always be people in the safe countries who respond as Truus did, when she thought of her upbringing: "If people are in need and you can help, you have to do it".



Truus in the sixties



Truus and her bust for her political and social work

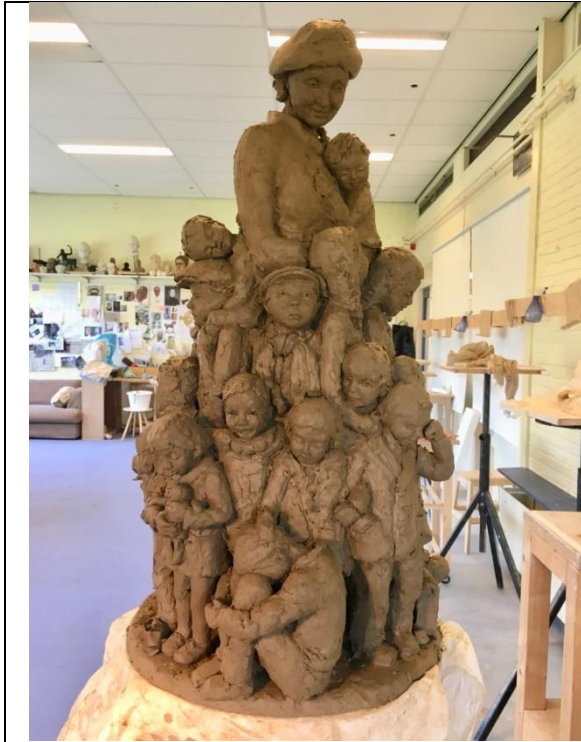
How the statue of Truus was made

The sculptors Annet Terberg-Pompe and Lea Wijnhoven based their concept on the image of Truus at the time of the first Children's transport. They show Truus taking care of 28 children. In the Jewish tradition "28" stands for "strength": Truus was good at this, saving children! The statue was first made in clay, 70 cm high. Then it was made three times larger with a 3D laser printer. The sculptors then gave the full-size model more detail with clay. Finally, a silicone cast was placed around it, so that the statue could be cast in bronze by bronze caster Hans Steylaert. The statue measures 220 cm high.

Books and Tulips

Truus own biography, *No Time for Tears*, can be read digitally via the website of the Historical Association Alkmaar. In *Sara, The Girl Who Went on a Transport*, we read through the eyes of a Jewish girl what it meant to be separated from her parents and to build a new life in England. In the novel, *The Last Train to Freedom*, you can read how the first Children's transport went. Truus plays an important role in both books. She has been given her own tulip: the Aunt Truus Tulip. A generous gift from a flower bulb farmer from the Alkmaar area.

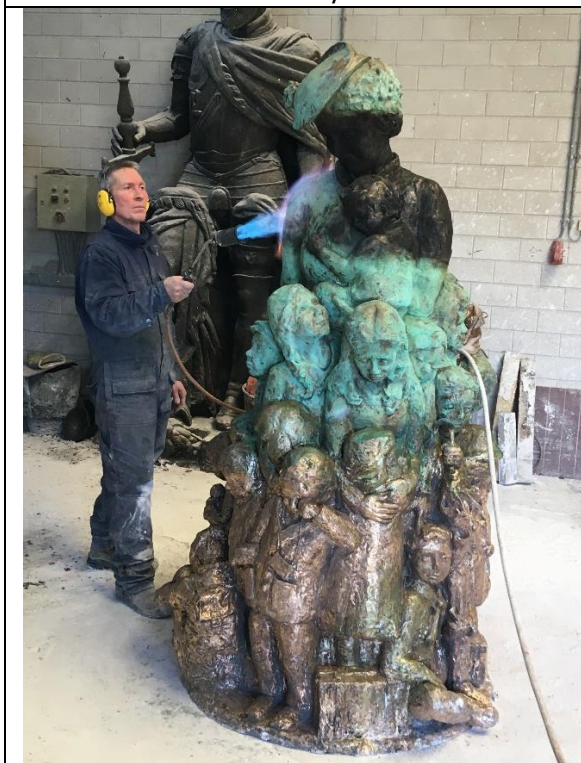
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The first clay model



Annet and Lea working on the laser-print



Bronze caster Hans Steylaert



Details of the children