

A Wartime Hideaway in the Amsterdam Zoo

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Abstract

Unlike most other Dutch zoo's, Artis Amsterdam Zoo remained open during the German occupation. Estimates suggest that as many as 250 people sought refuge there for at least 1 or 2 days during the war, some even stayed months or years. Many were young men trying to avoid transport to German forced labor camps or Jews seeking sanctuary. The book *Dreamscape* relates the adventures of a Jewish boy named Alfred Hirsch who, in 1942, finds himself unexpectedly trapped at the Amsterdam Zoo where he is forced to take cover to avoid Nazi capture and persecution. During his first days in hiding, the desperate and lonely Alfred must depend on what he sees and hears through the air vents in the outer wall of his cellar hideaway. Much later, he will dare to venture out after dark, like a nocturnal animal, roaming ever farther afield in the park to visit all wildlife enclosures. Alfred creates a weird and wonderful fantasy world in which the caged animals and garden sculptures become his friends and protectors. After the war his children insist that he tells his story, but Alfred's message goes beyond his story alone. He also wants the world to understand that, under certain circumstances, animals and sculptures can be so much more than they appear.

Conclusion: Under certain circumstances, animals and sculptures can be so much more than they appear. They even can become devoted friends and protectors.

Keywords: *Second Worldwar; Jewish Boy in Hiding; Starvation; Persecution*

Maarten Frankenhuis, a Second World War survivor born in July 1942, was the director of Artis Zoo in Amsterdam for almost 14 years. He retired 13 years ago and since his retirement he has written two books on the survival of Artis Zoo and other zoological gardens during the Second World War. For more than 20 years he collected historical information (archives, interviews, newspaper articles, minutes of the board etc.).

Between 1940 and 1945 Artis Zoo served as a hiding place for about 250 persons in total. Most were young men trying to escape Nazi forced labor (Arbeitseinsatz), and quite a number of Jews in hiding. No one was ever arrested on the Artis Zoo grounds.

Artis Amsterdam Zoo - back to its biopark roots

The Royal Zoological Society '*Natura Artis Magistra*', or Artis Zoo Amsterdam, is a 14-hectare (34-acre) park in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and is the fourth oldest public zoo in the world after London, Dublin and Manchester. At its founding in 1838, the stated mission was "To found a zoological society to enlarge public knowledge of natural history by collecting and exhibiting a collection of live animals and zoological objects".

Artis zoo is located in the old center of the city and most of the beautiful buildings and garden elements are highly prized as historical monuments.

In addition to its zoological collection, Artis Zoo houses a botanical garden with over 200 species of trees and shrubs, which together with the monumental buildings and special gardens, give the zoo its typical 19th century park-like atmosphere. Furthermore, zoological and geological museums, as well as a planetarium with a permanent exhibition on astronomy and space exploration, are part of the zoo complex.

The present day objectives of the Society are to offer public recreation and education, in the field of natural history and the environment. The animals and plants, the fossil and mineral collections, the planetarium, as well as the collection of non-living objects from the plant and animal kingdoms, are all instrumental in meeting these objectives. By fostering scientific research Artis Zoo is making a contribution to the conservation of endangered species of animals and plants and their habitats.

Over time, the zoo was able to expand little by little until in 1877 it reached its 10-hectare size with the purchase of land that would later accommodate the zoo's aquarium building, now a registered national monument. The Artis Aquarium was established in 1882 as one of the earliest public aquariums of its kind. It was renovated, modernized and considerably enlarged as recently as 1995, while preserving its unique historical character.

The Society's motto '*Natura Artis Magistra*' (Nature is the Tutor of the Arts) has been upheld ever since the foundation of the Society. For example, the Artis Zoo Farm houses some of the old breeds of Dutch domestic farm animals, that were portrayed in 17th and 18th century paintings by the Dutch masters, a school for amateur artists is located on the zoo's premises and a collection of over 65 sculptures – most antique bronzes or marble - are on permanent display.

Artis Zoo in wartime

Towards the end of the 1930s, Artis was threatened with closure. The number of visitors was declining steadily. A rescue committee was formed to provide money and draw up plans for modernization. Most of these plans were put into effect after the outbreak of war: the monkey rock, the camel field and the ibex rock with the waterfall were all completed at this time.

At the end of the war, during the so called *Hongerwinter* (winter of famine, 1944-1945) food for the animals as well as for the staff was very scarce; the big cats even had to live for some time on dried, salted cod that they really detested. Branches, grass and other herbivore feedstuff were collected in public parks and at cemeteries. Vast numbers of rats, feral pigeons and wild ducks were caught on the zoo grounds and even sparrows, starlings and other passerine birds were trapped to prevent starving of staff and animals.

Occasionally large herbivores were slaughtered to feed the carnivores and the starving staff. During the *Hongerwinter* even stray dogs and afterbirths from a maternity hospital were fed to the carnivores. The famine became so severe that frequently chickens, ducks, geese, pigeons and even once an adult pig were taken away by hungry citizens.

Despite the occupation, during the first three years things were going quite well for Artis. Precisely because of the war, more and more people were flocking to the zoo in search of harmless amusement. The German occupying forces also had a liking for zoos and often came to visit. But Artis was also not allowed to forget that there was a war on. In the summer of 1941, Allied bombers accidentally firebombed part of the zoo. The fire brigade was afraid to enter the lion gallery and director Sunier stood by with a gun, ready to intervene if necessary. Artis also had to contend with the persecution of Jews. Jewish employees and members of the Board of Directors were forced to give up their jobs, and in 1941 the zoo was 'Forbidden to Jews'. In 1943, a resistance group led by Gerrit van der Veen and Willem Arondéus set fire to the Amsterdam population registry, which was housed in the former Artis concert hall.

Artis became a place of refuge for Jews and for young men who had gone into hiding to avoid being sent to work in Germany, in other words: slave labor. They hid in places such as the loft above the predator gallery, the aquarium, the primate house, the wolf house and aviaries.

Dreamscape

In 2010 Frankenhuis published the novel *Droomonderduik* that tells the story of a young boy who escapes a razzia and spends the war hiding in Artis Zoo. *Droomonderduik* is based on a book that he wrote on the history of the Dutch zoos in wartime and about Artis Zoo in particular. The novel contains elements of his own years in hiding on farms in the eastern part of the Netherlands. The book is a tribute to his cousin who perished in the Holocaust.

This touching story, based on actual events, takes place in Artis, the Amsterdam zoo, during the German occupation of The Netherlands. Unlike most other Dutch zoo's, Artis remained open during the war. Estimates suggest that as many as 250 people sought refuge there for at least 1 or 2 days during the war, some even stayed months or years. Many were young men trying to avoid transport to German forced labor camps or Jews seeking sanctuary. Towards the end of the war, Artis even provided a safe haven to a few of Allied airmen as well as one German deserter.

The book *Dreamscape* relates the adventures of a Berlin-born Jewish boy named Alfred Hirsch who, in 1942, finds himself unexpectedly trapped at Artis where he is forced to take cover to avoid Nazi capture and persecution. Alfred's story actually begins in November 1938, following the terror of Kristallnacht in Germany, when his parents make the wrenching decision to send their 7-year-old son to live in relative safety with an aunt, uncle and nephews in Amsterdam.

A cheerful boy, Alfred begins to learn Dutch and settles nicely into his new surroundings, where his love for animals makes him an avid and regular visitor at Artis zoo.

Famine and fear

By the autumn of 1942, however, the persecution of Jews had reached a peak, and razzia's were a familiar sight in Amsterdam. Late one afternoon, as they were about to leave Artis, the 12-year-old Alfred and his aunt were unexpectedly confronted at the zoo's exit with one of the worst razzia's the city had experienced. When a night-watchman discovers them hiding in terror, he manages to conceal them in the nick of time in the Primates and Bird Sanctuary. Later, when Alfred's aunt sneaks out under the cover of darkness to check on the whereabouts of her husband and children, she insists that he stay put and await her return.

Alfred will never see his aunt again.

Hoping to find a more suitable accommodation for the child as soon as possible, the night-watchman hides Alfred temporarily in a boiler room in the cellar of the primate house. For most of the next three years, this dark, dusty coal cellar and its crawl spaces will be his 'temporary' hideaway during the long and boring days, and his only nourishment a daily ration smuggled in by the night-watchman. This kindly man, whom Alfred calls "Mr. Boss", secretly provides for the child as best he can. However, Mr. Boss is adamant that they remain perfect strangers for safety's sake, neither exchanging real names nor signs of recognition nor friendly greetings should their paths cross unexpectedly. Although Alfred occasionally catches a distant glimpse of the watchman and grows accustomed to hearing him move about on his nightly rounds, the two will not actually meet face to face until a week after liberation in May 1945.

During his first days in hiding, the desperate and lonely Alfred must depend on what he sees and hears through the air vents in the outer wall of his cellar hideaway. Much later, he will dare to venture out after dark, like a nocturnal animal, roaming ever farther afield to visit the other wildlife enclosures and buildings in the park. In an attempt to still his fear, alleviate his boredom and remain sane through-

out this incalculable ordeal, Alfred creates a weird and wonderful fantasy world in which some caged animals and garden sculptures become his friends and protectors. He is not alone, after all. He receives the most support and wise council from Sultan, a plaster orang-utan, as well as from two bronze Buddhas, the Greek river divinities, the friendly statue Mr. Westerman, who lives in the marble monument bearing his name, and two French hunting dogs standing *hautain* on their pedestals at the end of Parrot Lane. Together with a few caged animals, these extraordinary characters will befriend and protect this imaginative child during his long and fearful struggle to survive the war.

Later, following the liberation in May 1945, the dramatic farewells and disbanding of his imaginary friendships prove to be equally traumatic for Alfred as the fear, hunger and solitude he experienced during the long nights in the dark park and in the boiler room of the zoo. Alfred is comforted, however, by the knowledge that the animals and sculptures will miss him equally.

Alfred's unlikely friends played such an important role during his childhood years as war orphan that he extends their friendship into his adult life, later as both professional and family man. After retirement, Alfred finally finds the peace of mind to sort through his war memories, using the notes he jotted down while hiding in the boiler room.

His children insist that he tell his story, but Alfred's message goes beyond his story alone. He also wants the world to understand that, under certain circumstances, animals and sculptures can be so much more than they appear.

A tribute to Karel

It is imperative, I believe, to tell you, the reader, that this book is dedicated to Karel Frankenhuis, a young Dutch boy who lived in Amsterdam to the age of 7 years and 3 months. One must not round off the number of years for, at this age, each day is significant.

The German occupiers arrested Karel and his parents, David and Johanna, for a reason they probably never could comprehend. The very next day, the Germans and their Dutch accomplices sent the family on transport to the concentration camp at Westerbork. From there they were deported to Auschwitz where they were murdered on 7 September 1942 – only four days after their arrest.

I think that Karel, like most children, had a head full of plans and dreams for the future. Perhaps he even dreamt of managing the Amsterdam zoo one day. I like to believe that Karel would be very pleased to know that his little cousin later became Director of the Royal Amsterdam Zoo – and befriended the animals and sculptures there, in turn.

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