

## STICHTING WERKGROEP HERKENNING

The Stichting Werkgroep Herkenning was established in May 1981 as an organisation of providing help to the children of parents and grandparents who were on the side of the occupying forces in the years between 1940 and 1945. Even today, many of these children, now adults, are faced with problems in their personal and/or social lives.

The goals of the Werkgroep are:

1. to promote help for those people faced with serious problems in their personal or social lives because their parents or grandparents collaborated with the nazis in Worl War II.
2. to raise awareness among the general public for the problems this target group has to deal with.

The Werkgroep attempts to achieve this by:

- offering those concerned the opportunity to come into contact with one another to exchange their experiences and discuss the problems specific to their particular circumstances;
- organising and coordinating discussion groups;
- giving information and advice on the availability of spiritual help;
- stimulating circulation of publications and developing other ways of communicating information, thus contributing towards the population's better understanding of the problems of the target group;
- searching for contact with other wartime children with a view to combining the plea for help with an exchange of experiences, thus making it possible for the Werkgroep to perform its work more effectively;
- establishing and maintaining contact with those organisations that provide help in general, and extend help and support to war victims in particular.

The Stichting Werkgroep Herkenning has no ties with any political party, philosophical movement or religious fellowship.

The target group consists of alle those people born in 1928 or later. Persons born before then (between 1924 and 1928) only fall within the scope of the Werkgroep objectives if it is evident that they took no active part in any form of collaboration or, in the event of collaboration under force, explicitly disassociated themselves from their activities at a later date. On the ground of this definition the 'grandchildren of Dutch collaborators' are also included in the target group.

Apart from the individual problems specific in each case, we can distinguish between:

1. persons who have memories of the war (those born before 1942/43);
2. persons who, although having experienced the war, have no conscious memories of that period (those born between 1942/43 and 1945);
3. persons born after the war, i.e. those that did not experience the war.

When speaking about other war victims, only group 3 is strictly categorised under what is often referred to as the **second generation**. Our Werkgroep has the view (and this is also the opinion of experts) that not only the second category but also the first one can be faced with several aspects of these 'problems of the second generation'. It has even become evident in recent years that those people belonging to the third generation (the grandchildren) can have problems because of the choices their grandparents made during the war.

## ACTIVITIES

Activities of the Werkgroep to date:

- organising meetings and annual weekend gatherings for members;
- setting up a telephone service with one national and several regional contacts;
- organising discussion groups in most regions of the Netherlands;
- assisting with the preparation and production of radio and television programmes on this subject and helping to counsel those people phoning in for help;
- helping with publications for the national press, regional newspapers, magazines published by social bodies and religious institutions;
- publishing an information bulletin to act as the link between the Werkgroep, members and helpers;

- establishing and maintaining contact with a variety of organisations that offer care and support;
- compiling a bibliography on the problems of 'children of collaborators';
- maintaining an archive for (press) articles, photographs and tapes of radio and television programmes.

The Werkgroep supervised a national survey for the NIZW (Netherlands Institute for Health and Social Services) into support for children of collaborators and publishing a book on the results of that survey.

The Stichting Werkgroep Herkenning has gathered an enormous amount of data from discussions with fellow-sufferers; from meetings, from telephone conversations and from correspondence. From all these data we selected those subjects which evidently play a major role, which are typical of the problems experienced by the many different members of Herkenning.

When discussing the problems we distinguish between the cause of the problems and the effects they have some 50 years later.

Looking at the cause of the problems, we also distinguish between internal and external factors. Whereas we are very much aware that these factors are not easy to distinguish between, because of the interweave between the two, we have still chosen to make a distinction in order to bring at least some structure into a subject which is otherwise so complex.

## **CAUSES: FACTORS FROM WITHIN**

### **The family secret and isolation**

The child is conscious of the fact that it is part of a family in which some important event has taken place which is not discussed. That event relates to wartime experiences such as internment, time spent in refugees' camps, escape, torture, confiscation of goods, exclusion by relatives and acquaintances, etc.

That child has then to face a life of unanswered questions, a life of tension, in fact a life of double isolation: the child is then conscious of the fact that the other members of the family share a secret, which even he or she is not allowed to share. At the same time it is aware that this is a secret which no one in the outside world must come to know.

### **Conflicting loyalties towards the parents, confusion**

The child goes through conflicting emotions towards his or her parents. The war has changed them and they themselves have to wrestle with immense problems. Children sense these changes without being able to fully comprehend and feel very much left out of things.

If others have informed the child (external factor) of what the nazis were responsible for, that child becomes desperate to know whether or not its own parents were aware of what was happening, or whether they even took a part in it, whether they really are the evil people everyone says they are, etc.

### **The lack of a (basic) sense of security and protection**

When the war ended many children were unable to return to their own homes; many properties had been confiscated by the authorities. If the child could return home - after some time - many familiar things had often been removed (toys, the child's own bed). The effect this had on the child was that he or she had (partly) been deprived of the security of the parental home and his or her own things.

In many of our discussions we see a feeling of complete disorientation, a feeling of being cut off, that one has too small a basis, has had a bad start in life.

### **A sense of guilt; substitution?**

Emotional ambivalence towards the parents leads to a sense of guilt. The child starts to feel that he is responsible for the disharmony in the family: maybe he should be more amiable, more obedient.

Suppressed emotions sometimes erupt in aggressive behaviour, again leading to feelings of guilt.

There is also a sense of guilt towards other war victims: the child feels that in some way or another he or she has something to do, indirectly (via the parents), with the distress and miseries his fellow-man is going through. If that feeling of guilt for acts of war is denied or trivialised by the parents there is all the more reason for the child to take upon itself that guilt as a substitute. This feeling of guilt can be an enormous burden, being experienced as his or her own responsibility, especially during events

connected with the 4th of May (commemoration day of the war), in history lessons at school, when reading books, watching films about the war, etc. Even if deep down inside the child knows that he cannot possibly be responsible, it is still a deeply emotional experience.

### **Shame and the awareness that the world is a perilous place**

Drs. T.L.W. van Ravesteijn writes in an Icodobrochure:

'You know then what Auschwitz is, not what it was. You are ashamed and sense the sinisterness of the world. Your friends have no feeling of shame. For them the world is a trusted place because they have no knowledge of Amersfoort, Vught, Westerbork, Bergen-Belsen, Ravensbrück, Auschwitz, the Indonesian camps and all those other places of death. You are alone with a secret you not only fail to understand yourself, but one which you must never share with anyone else. Neither confession nor penitence offers solace. Typical of the second generation is that they are aware that concentration camps are the work of man. That man is capable of wounding his fellow-man inescapably and beyond repair. They are ashamed of this knowledge and that makes the world a sinister place for them...'

## **CAUSES: EXTERNAL FACTORS**

### **War experiences**

Older children of collaborators have all - either to a greater or lesser extent - experienced the horrors of war. As is the case in other groups too, these memories take their toll, even today. These memories have in fact become even more intense in recent years.

After **Dolle Dinsdag** (Tuesday 5 September 1944, the day on which the NSB, the Dutch NS Party, started to panic and the population started a warm welcome for their liberators - in translation that day is labelled **mad tuesday**) many children fled to Germany with (one of) their parents where they travelled from one refugee camp to another. Their welcome in Germany was far from hospitable: they all had to be housed and fed.

Wartime experiences differ greatly from one person to another: the main elements of all those experiences are being in danger while away from the security of your own home, being a displaced person, not being welcome anywhere, and being utterly powerless to do anything at all about the situation you find yourself in.

### **Rejection and hatred, both during and after the war**

During the war, many school-going children of collaborators were either ignored or provoked on account of the political choice their parents had made. Even adults were guilty of this kind of behaviour. When the war came to an end these reactions became even more frequent and more intense.

### **Foster home or children's home**

Some children spent time in internment camps with (one of) their parents. Many children of collaborators were taken into foster homes or children's homes for a while in 1945. [Some till 1947]. Treatment in these places left a great deal to be desired; it was often impersonal or downright scornful and generally humiliating.

### **School and job interviews**

Many of these children of collaborators failed to complete training courses they had started out on, or received less schooling than they wished. This was often due to the fact that confiscation of goods and possessions had brought their parents into financial difficulty. Older children had no other alternative than to help by going out to work.

Immediately after the war (but even recently as well) several people were rejected when applying for a job because of their parents' past history.

### **Scapegoat mechanism, and isolation**

Negative reactions on the part of neighbours are often the reason why children of collaborators refuse to discuss their experiences. The fear of being disapproved of, like their parents, is enormous, even among those who have never experienced any sign of hatred in their immediate surroundings.

## WHAT EFFECT DO THESE PROBLEMS HAVE TODAY?

If children of collaborators approach a social worker for help, they will seldom say that their problem has anything to do with what they went through during and after the war. They generally speak in terms of:

- Mistrusting other people, the inability to trust anyone, to give them warmth and friendship.

This is an extremely sweeping statement. As soon as a relationship is entered into, or contact is established, children of collaborators become confronted with the question (either consciously or subconsciously): **will I be accepted, even if they 'know'; and if I am accepted, will I be understood?**

This is something which is a cause of constant concern in all their relationships: with their partners, their own children, and with social workers!

Most other problems are connected with this item, in some way or another:

- Relationship problems: marriage problems and sexual difficulties, impotence;
- Anxiety, the fear of life itself, depression;
- Inhibitions, the inability to deal with emotions;
- A feeling of inferiority: the inability to do anything properly; a feeling of not really belonging;
- A strange sort of gratitude to everyone who pays attention to them. This implies the risk of clamping on to any relationship in which the other person is allowed to 'misuse' their 'submissiveness';
- Aggression, particularly in situations where either they themselves or others are done an injustice;
- A sense of guilt towards their parents, and also towards their partner who is expected to 'absorb' so much in the relationship;
- Physical complaints, a stiff neck or backache for instance; the burden of tension plus the 'secret' become virtually unbearable;
- Nervous complaints like insomnia and nightmares;
- Alcoholism; heavy smoking and an obsessive addiction to work.

The anxiety these people have to live with, day and night, is often immense. Many of them push themselves to the absolute limit, working hard in order to forget, always wanting to do more than is physically and emotionally possible. When circumstances (unemployment, incapacity for work, divorce, a death in the family, ageing) make them less resilient, both physically and mentally, it takes very little else to make them stressed. The problems they have tried to escape for many years then become unavoidable.