

THE RESISTANCE Truus & Freddie Oversteegen

Transcript of [What'sHerName Episode 64](#)

00:00:00 - 00:05:00

This episode contains descriptions of violence that may be upsetting to some listeners.

[theme music]

Olivia Meikle: Hi Katie!

Katie Nelson: Hi Olivia!

OM: What does it mean to be human?

[laughter]

OM: I thought I'd start us out, you know with something light and easy. You know, just a little chit-chat.

KN: Well those are the kinds of questions that one asks when one has been locked down for months and months.

OM: Exactly! All right - so, maybe that's a little too vague.

KN: Maybe.

OM: Um okay, so... How can someone *cease to be* human? Hmm.

KN: That's easier! [laughs]

OM: Yeah.

KN: Okay, I have no idea if I'm going to stick with this over the course of this episode, because I don't know what we're talking about. Here's the bold stance I'm going to take, and then I'll see if I stick with it. [laughs] I think it's impossible to become a non-human. I think anything humans do is 'human nature,' and you can't be anything but human.

OM: Ahh.

KN: Angel or devil or monster, it's all within us. We have the potential to be all those things. That's what I think.

OM: Hmm, all right.

KN: That's what I think right now anyway.

OM: [laughs] I think I agree with that. I think that usually when we call someone an animal or a monster, it's not wanting to acknowledge the truth about what humans can do and be and etcetera.

But if everything is human nature, then how do we measure ourselves? I mean, if we want to ally with the 'better angels' of our human natures, there has to be a line somewhere.

KN: Right.

OM: There has to be a line where we say: *This is a line I will not cross. I will not descend below this level, because that to me is inhumane.* Often in the end, right, it comes down to the individual having to decide like, *this is my line I will not cross this line.* And that might look different for every person. But the people who don't have a line scare *me*, and I think scare us as a society based on... the things we watch on TV and...

KN: Yeah, yeah, I guess so. I mean the people who don't have a line, so to speak, are... what we call psychopaths and serial killers.

OM: Yeah. [laughs]

KN: We say, this is a *broken person*. They don't have a line.

OM: Yeah, and even, right, "a broken person," so there is - there's something *wrong* there, right.

KN: Yeah. Yeah.

OM: Something went wrong. Somewhere in this human organism... it's not functioning correctly.

KN: Right. All because of our, our notions of how we can use, maybe, our minds and our willpower to 'overcome our animal natures' and be something that's more than just a beast or a creature.

OM: And we should, we *should* do those things.

KN: Right. Yeah.

OM: That is what 'being human' means is overcoming those lesser natures, or something, right?

KN: Yeah you're right. Being *more* than an animal, that's what it is to be human.

OM: Yeah.

KN: Hmm, interesting.

OM: So, our question to consider this week is: How can we remain human in inhuman circumstances?

Today I am going to tell you a story of two sisters named Truus and Freddie Oversteegen. They grew up in Haarlem in the Netherlands - the original Haarlem - in the 1930s. And at fourteen and sixteen years old they became two of the most effective and most important assassins of the Dutch resistance.

KN: What?

OM: That took an unexpected turn, didn't it?

KN: What?!? [shocked laughter] Yes it did.

[00:05:02 - 00:10:10]

KN: Fourteen and sixteen year old Dutch sisters - *assassins!*

OM: Assassins.

KN: Tell me more.

OM: I will! But first...

[theme music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle.

KN: and I'm Katie Nelson.

OM: and this is *What'sHerName*.

KN: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[theme music]

OM: To learn more about this really unusual and wild story, I talked to [Sophie Poldermans](#).

Sophie Poldermans: Hello, my name is Sophie Poldermans, and I'm the author of [Seducing and Killing Nazis: Hanne, Truus, and Freddie: Dutch Resistance Heroines of WWII](#).

OM: Truus and Freddie Oversteegen were raised by their mother alone in poverty conditions.

Sophie Poldermans: Mother, who was divorced at the time, trying to raise the girls and their little step brother, Robbie, in a tiny house. And already in 1934 they offered shelter to Jewish refugees.

OM: As the Third Reich is rising, refugees started just pouring in from Nazi-occupied countries. In the Netherlands, it is illegal to shelter these refugees because they are not supposed to be in the country.

KN: Oh, wow.

OM: As little girls, Truus and Freddie even gave up their own beds to hide Jewish refugees.

Sophie Poldermans: And they were teenage girls when Nazi Germany occupied the Netherlands in 1940, being faced with the question: what to do to adapt to this weird war situation, or to resist. Their mother was very active in the Communist party, and through context of their mother, they were introduced with this same Council of Resistance.

OM: Truus and Freddie were already distributing Anti-Nazi literature as children in the lead up to the war, and then as the war breaks out they continue to do that. This family is *not messing around* when it comes to their responsibility in this situation. The leader of a local resistance group named Frans van der Wiel approached them about doing more work for the resistance. Their mother agreed, and they began working with the Council of Resistance, which is a local resistance group in Haarlem.

Because these are the only two girls or women involved in the resistance in Haarlem, the leaders of the Council of Resistance thought that these two might work very well together with another teenage girl who had just joined the resistance in Haarlem. So they decided early on to bring them together. The Oversteegen sisters - their cover story is that they are nurses, because nurses are allowed to have bicycles when no one else is.

KN: No one else is allowed to have bicycles?

OM: No, all the resources are going to the Nazis. The only women who are getting permits for bicycles are nurses. So the sisters go to the hospital where their aunt is *actually* a nurse and a member of the resistance, and another girl is shown in to meet with them.

Sophie Poldermans: Each of the girls thought that the other girl might have been a spy for the Germans, so they didn't trust each other at all. Tension was really thick and they were really scared. So then they were just staring at each other waiting for the other to make the first move.

OM: They have their *guns drawn* just in case this is an ambush. And they are just waiting...

[laughter]

OM: Finally, suddenly, they all just become aware of the absurdity of this situation.

Sophie Poldermans: All of a sudden they really started laughing like crazy, as only teenage girls can.

OM: All three of them put their guns down on the table, and they begin making plans.

KN: Wow!

OM: And that is how the Oversteegen sisters met [Hannie Schaft](#). This is a name that is as famous to Dutch people as [Anne Frank](#).

KN: Wow.

OM: But, most people outside of the Netherlands have probably never heard of her. She was nineteen years old, a law school graduate, she has expressed a desire, as have the Oversteegen sisters, to do more - because they felt that things were getting so bad so fast, they needed to offer armed resistance.

KN: Hmm.

OM: Again, these are *teenagers*.

KN: Yeah.

OM: And they have been trained and prepared to become assassins.

Sophie Poldermans: They made a great team. It's really funny because all three girls were from completely different backgrounds and have completely different characters.

00:10:11 - 00:15:13

Sophie Poldermans: Hannie was really the intellectual, but at the same time a bit chaotic and a bit dreamy.

OM: I think my sons would describe her as 'chaotic good' in the Dungeons and Dragons alignment system. [laughter]

Sophie Poldermans: Truus was a bit of a tomboy, really very down to Earth, but also a natural leader. So Truus was the leader of the three. And then there was Freddie, who was still very, very young, very pretty, girly-girl.

OM: Freddie is the strategist; she makes the plans, she draws out the campaign. She's fiery and fierce. And even though she's the fourteen-year-old, she is a huge part of the driving force behind all of these missions that these girls carry out.

Sophie Poldermans: So clearly different characters, different backgrounds - but they had the same ideals. And very quickly, these girls become invaluable to the resistance. They would flirt with German officers to discover vital information and secrets about the German infrastructure, they moved Jewish children to and from safehouses hiding refugees, they bombed railways...

KN: Whoa!

OM: And most perilously, they assassinated Nazi officers.

Sophie Poldermans: This work took two forms. Sometimes, and this is what gets the most press, they would dress up like "Moffen girls." Moffen girls were girls who had relationships - or alleged relationships - with German soldiers. They would actually go to bars, and then seduce, for example, high ranking Nazi officers, and then lured into the woods...

OM: Where - sometimes one of the male resistance workers, and sometimes one of the other girls - would then shoot them.

KN: Whoa.

OM: Yeah. Other 'liquidations,' as they called them, were more straightforward and public.

Sophie Poldermans: They would always work in pairs. For example, they would ride their bicycles and one would sit at the back and shoot from there. So at least they had bicycles to get away fast.

OM: Like... they were doing 'bike-by shootings'? Or like, like - shooting and then run...?

Sophie Poldermans: Yes, they would ride their bicycles to a particular target, and then walk from there, shoot this person, and then they used their bicycles to get away.

KN: Whoa! What?! What - like in broad daylight?!

OM: In broad daylight, in the middle of the street. These are 'bike-by shootings.'

KN: Oh my gosh! [shocked laugh]

OM: It's wild. It's, this story is...

KN: How could they get away with that?

OM: Exactly, and I think part of that is the shock factor right? No one expects this to happen. But this is why the bikes are so necessary, because they can get away - because no one else has a mode of transportation. And as long as they get out fast enough, they can get away.

KN: And I guess nobody would expect the nurse on the bike would be the one who just shot somebody.

OM: Exactly.

KN: Wow!

OM: So some of this is genuinely funny to think about. Frans van der Wiel, the head of this resistance group, a man, had to do her [Truus's] makeup.

Sophie Poldermans: Truus had never worn makeup before. She said, "Well, Frans would help us make up." And then they would have bright red lipstick, and they looked, like, really hideous. [laughter] So, well, they also had a great laugh about it. Of course that was also the nerves speaking again.

KN: Yeah that makes like, the - the 'amusing montage' in a movie version of this story, right? Teaching her how to walk sexy and...

OM: Right! Exactly.

KN: ...high heels...

OM: But the truth is, this is a *terrifyingly dangerous* thing that they're doing.

KN: Yeah.

OM: They have to get high-ranking Nazi officers to trust them enough to follow them out of the bar, into the woods - and then kill them. These girls are at extremely high risk of *terrible* things happening to them, right?

I really struggled with how to tell this story because I think we need to be really careful not to get swept up into the 'girl power,' voyeuristic pleasure of this story and remember what we're actually talking about here. These are *teenage girls*, and as much Schadenfreude as it gives us to think about these Nazi officers falling at the hands of the people that they would least expect - that is *not an okay thing* to ask *children* to do, right?

00:15:01 - 00:20:07

KN: Wow, yeah.

OM: So, like I said this is - there are actually really funny and fun aspects of this story, and I don't want to just 'rain on the parade' of the amazing-ness of what they did... but *here's* the thing I find *actually* remarkable: these girls did this horrific, dangerous, terrifying work, but they somehow manage to remain human while they did it. They created their own code of ethics

KN: Oh Wow.

OM: in this impossibly inhuman situation, and they stuck to it. They're the only women in this group, and they decide together that they will have certain rules for what they do, and they *never* break them.

KN: Interesting. Kind of the pirate code or something.

OM: Yeah, exactly. But it wasn't even - you know, the resistance group in general has their rules, but this is - these three girls make their *own* code and say, *Here are the things that we will not do*.

KN: Ahh, interesting.

Sophie Poldermans: They really did what they did because they thought this was the only way to achieve justice, because it had to be done. But they also tried to remain human, and they resolutely refused to carry out missions where children were involved, for example. They actually got the assignment to kidnap the children of Seyss Inquart, the Reichskommissar here in the Netherlands, but they refused to do that. And with one female target who remained in her house all the time, so it was really hard - *finally* she came outside, but she had a little kid next to her, so then they also refused.

OM: *They're children*, and they are setting these rules of ethics.

KN: Yeah, that's profound.

OM: They were very clear about why they were doing this. And they didn't regret their work. But they had drawn these lines in the sand and they wouldn't cross them. Because they understood - I think better than any of the adults around them - that part of the danger of this work wasn't just losing their *lives*. They were worried about losing their *souls*.

They refused to give up their humanity no matter how inhumane the situation. And I find that completely remarkable. The fact that they knew that they could, and *must*, draw these boundaries for themselves. I think it's one of the most courageous things that they did - sticking to these convictions even when everyone around them tells them that they're wrong.

KN: Yeah. It brings up an interesting question in my mind about agency. Because today when we think about and talk about child soldiers - you know we think of it as one of the worst things you can do to a child, to pressure them into war and the trauma. You know - handing a child a gun is going to create permanent psychological damage. But then in this scenario, then it becomes less clear whether it's a good or bad thing to do. And they seem to have so much of their own agency, like they appear to have chosen...

OM: Yeah, I mean all three of these girls *chose* this. They pushed to be given guns and given more to do.

KN: So you know - do we give them the agency over their lives and say this is *them*? This is all their choices. Or do we say these are children who got shoved into a nightmarish scenario and tried to save other children from falling into the same thing?

OM: Yeah, I don't know. I think that's one of the most important questions about this story is: What actually happened here? How do we *talk about* what happened here?

KN: Yeah.

OM: Do we celebrate or mourn?

KN: Or can you do both at the same time?

OM: Yeah, how do you... how do you do that?

[ad break]

00:20:07 - 00:25:02

OM: So, as I said most of what gets attention are these 'seduce and kill' assassinations, but most of the assassinations probably were not seduce-first missions. They were just, as we said, out in the open killings. And usually what happened is - two of the girls would go out on a bike, they would approach the target, verify that this was the right person, and then shoot them, and then they would bike away.

KN: That is so wild.

OM: These bike-by shootings *look* very simple. They are *actually* the result of months and months of planning. These are not just random Nazi officers. They're not just going to the bar and picking up any random Nazi officer. These are precisely planned and calibrated missions.

Sophie Poldermans: The entire resistance group would have meetings of which particular Nazi target had to be eliminated. It took a lot of planning, they didn't have the internet like we do, or pictures even. So they had to know what their target looked like and maybe the road they took home... So it took weeks, really, to prepare a mission like that.

OM: These are specific targets. It's not enough to just be a Nazi officer. We're not just killing indiscriminately, we're *saving lives*. And those balances have to be weighed: How many lives will be saved by *this* liquidation? How many lives could be saved by *this* one? So, these are often Nazi officers that are targets. But increasingly as the war goes on, they are also Dutch traitors, Dutch collaborators - people who have sold out Jews or refugees hiding in safe houses to the government, have informed on resistance workers. These are the people who are being targeted. And this makes their *other* ethics rule even more important here. The girls' second rule was that they would *always* have the *target themselves* verify their identity before they shot them. It was critically important to them to make sure that they would never kill an innocent person.

KN: Wow.

OM: This means they have to slow down, talk to the target, ask them, "Are you really such and such" before they shoot them! So this means there's more opportunity to be caught, right. There's more chance they'll be recognized and stopped.

KN: Yeah.

OM: But, it also means they have to interact with this *human being* that they are about to kill. They have to speak to them and see them as a human being in the *seconds* before they kill them. This just seems so difficult to me, and I think it shows just how important it was to them that their work be *right* and *righteous* - even if it endangered their own lives.

00:25:10 - 00:30:04

OM: But they also didn't second-guess themselves. Once they had taken a mission, they were *all in*. Truus Oversteegen told Sophie Poldermans, "Once I was confronted with an S.S. officer who was killing a small baby by hitting it against a wall. The father and the sister had to watch. I shot that guy, right there and then. That wasn't an assignment, but I don't regret it."

KN: Wow.

OM: So that killing is outside of the rules of how the resistance is supposed to operate, but it still is within *their own* code of ethics. And so... she shot that guy right there and then.

KN: How many people did they kill?

OM: We don't know.

Sophie Poldermans: It's not known how many people they liquidated, how many of those missions they carried out. Freddie would always respond with "Well, we were soldiers. Little ones, but still they were soldiers - and you never ask a soldier that question."

OM: There are specific liquidations that certain of the girls talked about later, and there's news reports as people are being shot in the street by girls on bicycles. Those things were getting reported - although the Nazi regime was trying to cover that up, also, because this work was *strategic* and *specific* and meant to save lives - but it was also a wildly effective psychological campaign. The Nazis were *completely* freaked out by this. I mean imagine, right, the entire Nazi worldview is built on this fascist machismo, right - that women are inferior, that these are the supermen, the biggest, toughest, best men in the world - and they're getting routinely assassinated by *girls*.

KN: So did the Nazis know that it was girls?

OM: Yes - you know, as these men disappear from the bar... I'm not sure how long it took, but at some point, they have to start to realize, right, anyone who goes off to the woods disappears. Because they would bury them - they would shoot them, take their uniform for the resistance to use, and bury them.

KN: Wow. Oh my gosh.

OM: Immediately. So these Nazi officers were just disappearing. But these street liquidations were very public. And Hannie Schaft especially became notorious. She had bright red hair. So she became the Number One Most Wanted member of the resistance.

KN: Whoa!

OM: They were desperate to catch her because she was completely demoralizing the army. All three of these girls were completely destabilizing and freaking out the troops.

KN: How did they get away with it? How could they stay safe when, like, the Nazis knew who they were?

OM: So they - they didn't know their names, right, and they didn't know *who they were* who they were. They themselves - you know, they're moving people to safe houses, but they are also *themselves* being moved around, and shuffled around, from city to city around the Netherlands. These girls are 'notorious in their anonymity,' and the *rothaariges Mädchen*, the redhead girl, is target number one.

Sophie Poldermans: Hannie Schaft also had to dye her red hair black so she wouldn't get recognized. And she would wear glasses made out of window glass. Truus would often dress up as a man, because she was already a tomboy. So yeah, they had to really really be careful.

OM: There's a photograph that we have on our website of Truus dressed as a man, and Hanni with her hair dyed and her glasses - taken by a resistance member before they go out on a mission.

One fascinating cameo side note here for listeners familiar with the story of Corrie Ten Boom...

KN: Yeah.

OM: The author of [*The Hiding Place*](#), a famous anti-Nazi resistance family from the Netherlands? In February 1944, when the Ten Boom family home is raided, thirty people are arrested and the entire families sent to concentration camps - the big famous raid that sends them all to the camps. There were six people left stranded in the hidden compartments of the Ten Boom house.

KN: Like that the Nazis didn't find?

OM: They didn't find them - and so these people are stranded in the house with guards around and cannot leave. Two of those people were Truus and Freddie Oversteegen, who were hiding in the safehouse...

KN: What!

OM: ...and they were only able to escape from the house by climbing up through the ceiling and across the roofs of nearby buildings...

00:30:04 - 00:35:00

KN: Wow!

OM: ...until Freddie fell through a skylight and would have died except that building happened to be a mattress shop...

KN: What?!

OM: ...and she landed on a mattress. The sisters were able to hide in the shop until the morning, when they were able to escape and alert the resistance to the four Jewish refugees still trapped in the safehouse, who were then rescued the next day by policemen who were sympathetic to the resistance.

KN: That is crazy! Wow.

[music]

OM: Freddie could look like a child very easily, so she would still wear her hair in braids. But that childlike appearance also makes it more difficult for Freddie to do *some* work.

KN: Because they were women there were - if they walked down the street with a child, it was not very suspicious. So then they would bring children to safe houses.

OM: This work was done mostly by Truus and by Hannie Shaft, because they were fair-haired, red-haired. Freddie was dark, and was so small that it was dangerous - she could quite easily be taken for a Jewish child herself - and so she could not do that work because they were very worried that she would be caught and taken as a Jewish child herself.

Now, this work might seem so much less traumatic than, you know, *murdering people*.

KN: Yeah.

OM: But the girls *hated* it, they hated doing this work.

Sophie Poldermans: Well that was very traumatizing because it didn't always go well. Truus recalled an example where she was in a boat at some point with some Jewish children, and the boat was bombed by the Germans. All the children just fell into the water and drowned. Truus - she never really minded to talk about the resistance, but this was really something that she often remained silent, because it was just simply too painful to talk about.

[music]

OM: They did it because it needed to be done and they could do it more safely than the men, but...

Sophie Poldermans: Hannie had said that "All this work with the Jewish children only makes me cry. I prefer to fight."

OM: So again destabilizing those - what do we want to think about this work that they did? Yes, they should be doing the work, saving the children. But *they* didn't think that, *they* didn't want to do that work. They found that work *much* more deeply traumatizing.

KN: Yeah, oh.

OM: Not to say that the murdering wasn't traumatizing - it was.

KN: Yeah. I'm - I can see how I would feel like, rather than constantly trying to save the children and losing half the time... why don't we go to the source who is *doing this* to the children and get rid of them?

OM: Yeah. Exactly. You know, I - I worked in an orphanage in China for four years and it was... it was important, and so I did it - *every week* I was there.

But it gutted me. I couldn't do *anything else* on the days that I did that. I went in the morning to the orphanage, and the rest of the day I just had to sort of recover. The 'by-proxy trauma,' witnessing these things, was worse than many of the bad things that have happened to me in my life. So I completely understand this, even though it seems very counterintuitive.

KN: Yeah.

OM: They also did more ‘traditional espionage-y’ type of work.

Sophie Poldermans: And they also committed acts of sabotage. So they would attack and bomb railways, for example. They would also map out coastal defenses, like for example the Atlantic Wall. So they would giggle a little bit, and flirt, and try to coax information out of them.

OM: And everything they're doing, they're better at it - because nobody expects girls to be doing it. Even though they are notorious and famous as these assassins, people still... you know, we've talked about this, when people don't expect women to be able to do something...

KN: Yeah.

OM: ...it doesn't matter how many times they do it, they won't believe it's going to happen again. It doesn't matter how many women defeat Rome, ‘women can't defeat Rome’ so we are not prepared for it when it happens.

KN: Yeah and I - for some reason I just love that.

OM: It's the best revenge, right?

00:35:00 - 00:40:05

KN: Yeah the best.

OM: To use your condescending underestimation of my talents to defeat you.

KN: Oh, I love it. [laughs]

OM: They are really great at thinking on their feet. There's so many great stories in this book, but this is one of my favorite stories, just because it illustrates that sort of fearless bluster. Understanding the psychology of the fact that they're women, and that people don't know how to respond to what's going on, and therefore will just choose not to do *anything*.

So, this is immediately following a failed assassination attempt. They shot the target twice but he survived. The military police arrive and they have not been able to get away. So they flee to a cafe. Truus pulls out her gun and shouts, “Gentlemen! Your attention please - we're coming in now, but when the Germans come in, *we've been here all afternoon*. If you do not behave the way we want you to, and we're on our way to heaven...? we will take a few of you with us!”

KN: Oh! [laughs]

OM: So they grab drinks to make their breath smell of alcohol, and they pretend to be drunk.

KN: Oh my gosh.

OM: And when the German officer investigating comes in, Truus hangs on his neck, flirting and groping in a super-drunk, obnoxious way - and her behavior was so annoying and so vulgar that he left the cafe because he was offended.

KN: Wow! Amazing! *How is this not a movie?*

OM: Right?!

[music]

OM: And then on March 21st, 1945, less than a month before the liberation of the Netherlands...

KN: Yeah I was just gonna say that!

OM: ...and *well after* the Nazis knew they were going to lose the war, both Freddie Oversteegen and Hannie Schaft were independently stopped at checkpoints by the Nazis. Freddie was cycling through the city. She heard people screaming "Raid! Raid!" So she quickly detoured into the forest, hid the gun that she was carrying in her bag in the forest. When she reached the checkpoint and was asked for her papers, she replied that 'she didn't have any because she wasn't fifteen years old yet.' [laughter] She's nineteen years old at this point.

KN: Oh. Okay.

OM: But she still looked so young that they believe her, and they eventually let her go. Hannie was stopped at another checkpoint in the city and was forced to open the bags on her bicycle, where the Nazis discovered hidden resistance newspapers that she was attempting to deliver to another part of the city.

Sophie Poldermans: So she was arrested - but still the Germans had no idea who she was. She had her gun with her - the Germans only discovered that later on during interrogation, and then they saw the red roots from her hair, then they knew for sure that 'this is the girl with the red hair we've been looking for for so long.'

OM: When Truus and Freddie realized that Hannie had not come home, they were beside themselves, obviously, and they alerted the resistance groups throughout the city. And soon heard that a girl matching Hannie's description had been taken into custody the night before. They immediately began forming plans to rescue Hannie. They alerted all of the resistance workers who were undercover in various prisons, and Truus dressed as a German nurse and went to the prison trying to get access to Hannie Schaft. But she had gone to the wrong prison, and nobody was able to get Hannie out, or even locate her, for the next three weeks.

But on May 5th, the country was finally liberated. So, the prisoners are all being released all across the city, and Truus waited outside the prison all day with a bouquet of flowers, ready to welcome back their beloved prisoner... but Hannie never came out.

And unbeknownst to everyone...

Sophie Poldermans: On April 17th, not even three weeks before the end of the war, Hannie Schaft was taken out of her cell, and brought into the dunes, and was executed there.

Both allies and Germans had agreed not to execute anymore.

OM: But as a final act of vengeance for the way this red-haired girl had terrorized the Nazi occupiers for five years, they killed her anyway - and she had been dumped in an unmarked grave where she had been shot.

00:40:06 - 00:45:11

OM: So, the war is over - but the first news that Truus and Freddie Oversteegen learn, in this new free future, is that their comrade-in-arms Hannie Schaft is dead. In November of that year, Hannie Schaft was given a state reburial with hundreds of other Dutch resistance heroes. The entire Dutch government and the Queen herself were there.

[music]

The war is over, and it's time to move on. But you *can't* move on when you have done the things that these girls have done. Now, of course, we would say PTSD...

KN: Right.

OM: They have nightmares, trauma, they can't sleep - they are deeply, deeply wounded. And, as soon as the war is over, a new pressing agenda emerges for the Dutch government - and that is the fight against communism and the rise of the Cold War. And suddenly, *living* heroes, who have communist ties, are dangerous. Dead heroes, like Hannie Schaft, are conveniently pure and easy to honor.

KN: Yeah.

OM: But messy complicated damaged heroes like the Oversteegen sisters...

KN: Right.

OM: ...and especially in times like this, of post-war - everyone wants and needs, probably, simple clear lines...

KN: Yeah.

OM: Truus and Freddie's mother was a communist activist before the war. They both have communist ties and clear communist leanings, which in the face of fascism was a plus, right? *Almost all* of the resistance groups are growing out of or linking into communist activism. It means that the country *cannot* acknowledge the work that Truus and Freddie did *and* keep this narrative that they, especially the royal family, are trying to keep.

So after the war, Truus Oversteegen becomes an artist, and she is a very public figure, she's speaking out publicly when she can about what they did, about what happened. She's especially active in honoring Hannie Schaft's legacy - but she's continually silenced and shut down. And as time goes on, people are less and less interested in hearing about resistance work - because it is so linked to the things that are currently very dangerous in their own sort of McCarthy-istic version of anti-communism and blacklisting. It is such a bizarre, upside-down kind of world that these women have to live in now.

Sophie Poldermans: Freddie, she lived a more secluded life and really focused on her children. She would hardly ever talk about the war, and her husband also kind of protected her from all the nightmares and all the memories. So they would literally just leave the country for a couple of months.

OM: Freddie especially cannot cope with the celebrations around Liberation Day - all of these memories of everything that happened. And eventually her husband buys a trailer and they leave the country for several months every year to get Freddie away from any reminders of what happened - of what happened to Hannie Schaft, of the war work, of all of it.

KN: Wow.

OM: So, while Hannie gets a royal reburial in a public monument, Truus and Freddie Oversteegen are erased almost overnight from the narrative. These erasures really really bothered Freddie especially, she was extremely bitter - and rightfully so...

KN: Yeah.

OM: ...about the way that they were treated. And not just these women, but everyone involved in the resistance - many many people who worked with resistance, were punished for being 'associated with communists.' And even just people who ran safehouses, because they worked with the communist decades earlier. By *hiding children*. It is... it's a really disturbing end to this story, and... *I really don't like it.* [rueful laughter]

KN: Their lives are at this awkward intersection. We like stories with clear-cut good guys and bad guys. You know, resistance fighters = good guys. Nazis = bad guys. That's very clear. And then, by the 1950s, everybody's going "communists = bad guys." And then, right, people who were clearly good guys before now seem allied with the bad guys. That's too messy for our simple narratives.

00:45:11 - 00:50:04

OM: Yeah, and - we already are uncomfortable thinking about what they did anyway, so it's much easier to just pretend that never happened.

KN: Oh, man, this actually takes me right back to our very first episode, [episode one](#), because I would love to ask these two sisters the question that I asked you in episode one, which is: *Should we fight for a cause?* You know after everything they gave, and the cause that they believed in, and then becoming so disillusioned with - you know all systems and all authority and everything, I would love to know from their perspective: Should we fight for causes or not?

OM: Well, *we* can't ask them - but Sophie Poldermans did.

KN: Yay!

OM: When she was sixteen years old, Sophie Poldermans wrote a paper in high school on Hannie Schaft, for her history class.

Sophie Poldermans: But I really dived into the topic, and then through a friend of my father, discovered Truus' contact details. So I just called her up and she invited me over for an interview. [laughter] And it was a special bond that grew from there. She really trusted me with her story, and through the next generation. And she introduced me to her sister Freddie. She asked me to be the keynote speaker of the national [Hannie Schaft Commemoration](#). So that's what I did when I was seventeen. I worked with them for ten years, and I personally knew both women for twenty years, so they always trusted me with their stories.

OM: So she does this long interview with Truus Oversteegen, at the same age that Truus was when she joined the resistance. And Truus seems to have recognized a kindred spirit. And she became one of the only people to get a first-hand record of this story from the sisters who actually lived it.

KN: Wow.

OM: When Freddie Oversteegen died in 2018, Truus died in two thousand sixteen...

KN: Wow!

OM: I know, very recent. This history is not 'history,' this is very very recent. So when Freddie died, there was a sudden burst of interest in the US about this story - the teenage girls who seduced and killed Nazis, this great sort of [schadenfreude](#) hero story. And that's when Sophie Poldermans decided it was time to share the *real* story, because there was a huge demand for English information about this story, and she really felt the need to share the real story.

Sophie Poldermans: Knowledge about World War II is fading, and nowadays we see this shocking increase in holocaust deniers, so I thought, oh you know - I need to write down this story right now.

OM: And so she started a website, [Sophie's Women of War](#), to tell these stories the way these women spoke of it - which was their battle to stay human, to stay ethical, and to stay *good* in the face of evil. [The book](#) is amazing. We've only touched on a tiny fragment of this story. What Truus recognized in Sophie Poldermans was that kindred spirit of a girl who wants to change the world, who feels the responsibility to *do* something. And she strongly encouraged Sophie Poldermans to follow that. She did not encourage her to become an assassin, obviously [laughter] but she was very clear that the world is *failing at being human*, and that she had so much hope for that rising generation - to take on that mantle of fighting the forces of evil, fighting the forces of racism that allowed the Nazis to treat other human beings the way that she saw. And she was making sure that the teenage girl in front of her knew that the fight wasn't over.

00:50:05 - 00:54:15

OM: I don't think we can say as much what Freddie would say, because Freddie didn't talk about these things very much, but Freddie herself - although she disengaged from the political work - she was always active in anti-war work for the rest of her life.

KN: That's interesting. It seems like those two sisters maybe landed in two different places - one of them saying, "The fight isn't over, keep on fighting" and then the other one saying, "No more fighting."

OM: Yeah, that - that you know, they live through the exact same experience, but they land in very different places. I've sat with the story for a long time. I've read this book several times now, and I've been sitting with the story trying to figure out how to tell this. And I think... I guess what I want to land in is, to me: it's remarkable and praiseworthy when teenagers do what they believe needs to be done to make the world better. **And**, I think it is one of the most devastating indictments of society in general when it *allows itself to get to the point* where children have to be begging the adults around them to make the world a livable place.

KN: Ahh that is such an interesting idea too, because I feel like - from the historical perspective, change *always* comes from the youth, and old people are rarely going to change the world.

OM: Yeah, I'm resigned to the fact that *is going to be* what happens. But **man**, I wish that it didn't have to be that way. I don't want a world where my kids have to be an Oversteegen, or a [Sophie Scholl](#) or a [Greta Thunberg](#).

KN: Do children feel obliged to put themselves on the altar these days because we have a cultural narrative that that's how you change the world? What if our society said, "You can do it in ways other than laying down on the altar."

OM: Hmm.

KN: Fascinating.

OM: It's complicated and messy. That's - that's the tagline for basically every class I ever teach, at the end is: *It's complicated and messy*. And that's where we land here - it's complicated and messy, and I don't know the answer.

KN: Oh that's perfect. It brings us full circle back to your first question: "What does it mean to be human? *It's complicated and messy*." [laughter]

OM: I guess in the end, to me, this is... it's a legacy to be honored - but it doesn't mean that it is a circumstance that I can cheer.

KN: Yeah it's - it's an incredible story. It's heartbreaking. It's amazing.

[music]

Sophie Poldermans: There's a romantic image that we have... but they were definitely no cowgirls. And they were traumatized by it for the rest of their lives. They had to pay the price.

[Theme music]

Huge thanks to Sophie Poldermans. If you want to learn more about Truus and Freddie Oversteegen, Hannie Schaft, the Dutch resistance, and everything we've talked about today you can find links, photos, resources, and more at our website, whatshernamepodcast.com. There you can also get a copy of Sophie Poldermans's wonderful books *Seducing and Killing Nazis*. You can also sign up to [become a Patron](#) and help us create more episodes of the podcast, and get great rewards like cross stitch patterns, trading cards, and more. You can also follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook where we post lots of photos each week. Music for this episode was provided by Paula Robison, Mariko Anraku, Emmitt Fenn, Esther Ebrami, Brent Hugh, and Amanda Setlik Wilson. Our theme song was composed and performed by Daniel Foster Smith. *What'sHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson, and this episode was edited by Olivia Meikle.