

Mark your article using Thinking Notes.
 Show evidence of a close reading with 7-10 annotations.
 Write a 1-pg reflection or write a paragraph response on the blog.

German artist saved hundreds of Jews during WWII

Source: McClatchy-Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff

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Grade Level 8 Word Count 881

BERLIN — This is the story of how a beloved German children’s book illustrator serving in the German army saved the lives of hundreds of Jews from Adolf Hitler’s death machine.

It’s a story from before Werner Klemke was deeply beloved for his drawings of the “Grimm’s Fairy Tales,” which made their way to every East German child’s bookshelf.

It’s also a story that the artist, who died 20 years ago, never told. It surfaced only when Dutch documentary filmmaker Annet Betsalel asked whether she could poke around in the long-shuttered records of the Jewish community of Bussum, the Netherlands.

What she found was the story of a rescue network set up by a Jewish businessman, Sam van Perlstein. He knew in 1942 that Jews were living on borrowed time under Nazi occupation and that if they were going to survive they were going to need help.

"Rendezvous at Erasmus"

The saga, which Betsalel is turning into a documentary titled “Rendezvous at Erasmus,” is every bit as spellbinding as the fairy tales Klemke illustrated.

It began once upon a time, in a city called Amsterdam, in a magical bookstore called Erasmus, famed for carrying books filled with ideas the Nazis feared.

One day, a love of books brought a young German soldier named Johannes Gerhardt into the store. He was so enchanted by the books that when he left the store, he forgot his rifle. A young man named Mels de Jong chased him down and reminded him of the weapon. Soon they became friends. De Jong was married to Sam van Perlstein’s daughter.

To survive the Nazis, van Perlstein needed documents showing that he was half Aryan, and he asked Gerhardt for help. Gerhardt was a photographer and knew he could help with part of the project, but he’d need another friend to produce the documents themselves. He turned to another another German soldier, Klemke, who also loved books and hated Nazis, and was an artist.

The documents they created were perfect, and fooled everyone who needed to be fooled. They allowed van Perlstein to get back his business and money that had been frozen. That money went to pay for the resistance to the Nazis, and a hideaway network.

A Printing Office Set Up

Klemke, who later in life was known for perfectionism in printing down to the choices of paper, typefaces and inks for the books in which his work was published, made up a story to hide his work from his Nazi superiors. He told them that he could make nice booklets of cocktail recipes for them if he could only get a small printing office set up.

Once this was provided, he made the cocktail books — but he also produced fake birth certificates, food ration coupons, baptismal records and ID cards. He did this work despite

knowing that had his superiors, or any unfriendly person, discovered what he was doing, he almost certainly would have been executed.

But he wasn't caught. And over the next few years, he produced documents that helped some people escape from the country, and allowed others to survive while they remained in hiding.

As Betsalel mentioned, the notion of Jews hidden in the Netherlands is hardly news. Yet unlike the tragedy of Anne Frank, the young girl whose family's hideaway in Amsterdam was revealed, no one was ever betrayed in the villages where Klemke worked. Nationwide, fewer than 20 percent of Dutch Jews survived, but where Klemke's documents were used, more than 50 percent lived.

"I do wonder what if Anne Frank had lived here," Betsalel said of Bussum. "Would she have survived?"

In all, the network saved an estimated 500 Jews. Others, including members of the underground and British pilots, also were saved. The hiding places built into walls and attics and cellars in the village were not discovered, and today are used as storage rooms. The search for a network of underground tunnels continues.

Letters from Jews He Saved

Yet Klemke, whose artwork made him a perfect storyteller, never talked about that stage of his life, not in dozens of interviews or speeches.

It had long been known that Klemke had been a German soldier during World War II, stationed in the Netherlands to uphold the Nazi occupation of that nation. He later lived in communist East Germany, where being part of the anti-Nazi resistance would have earned him respect. Still, he chose not to tell his story.

On his deathbed, Klemke told his children they could find "important documents" in his office. The documents were letters from Jews he had helped save, testifying to his efforts in case he ever faced prosecution for having been a Nazi soldier. He'd never shown them to anyone.

Betsalel noted that when an acquaintance once asked Klemke about the rescue effort, he responded: "What was so special about it? I only did what any man should have done." She said Klemke and van Perlstein had reminded each other that they had saved so few, and so many were not saved.

Whatever the reason, the German newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* recently noted the incredible twist to his story.

"Many a German kept silent about their S.S. membership," it wrote, referring to the worst of the Nazi troops. "Klemke kept quiet about being in the resistance."

Possible Response Questions:

- Write a response that explains the central idea of the article. Use at least two-three details from the article to support your response.
- How might the outcome of the war been different if people like Klempt had not existed? How might the outcome have changed had more people like Klempt existed?
- Select any passage and respond to it.