

Contribution Student Association of the Faculty of Medicine (MFLS)

During the second world war, and the German occupation of the Netherlands, the University of Leiden initially could remain open. However, discontent amongst students, professors, and university staff grew with each tightening of the rules. On November 26, 1940, the situation reached a tipping point. The German occupiers ordered the dismissal of Jewish professors at the University.

Professor Cleveringa's speech on this day, in which he expressed his disapproval of the dismissal of his Jewish colleagues at the university, is perhaps well known. As a result, law students went on a strike. What is lesser known is that at the same time, professor Barge, professor of anatomy and embryology, gave a public lecture in which he made a medically conclusive argument that there was no such thing as a Jewish and 'German' race. Consequently, with this lecture, he disclaimed the conceptions of the Nazi's that there was a difference between the two groups. This protest contributed to the widespread protest within Leiden University against this uneven and unequal treatment of Jewish university students and staff.

As a consequence of the strike, the occupier closed the university. Until the end of 1941, there was still the possibility to take exams, but it was often uncertain whether they would continue. At times these were taken illegally, at the homes of teachers and professors. Additionally, studying (at other universities) would only remain possible if students signed a declaration of loyalty to the German regime. This presented the students with a moral dilemma. If they signed the declaration, they could continue and finish their studies legally. On the one hand, this would provide the students with some form of security, though with the knowledge that they would declare themselves loyal to the German regime, something that was in direct opposition to most students' beliefs. Not signing the declaration meant their loyalty to equal treatment. This however at the cost of great insecurity regarding the further course of their studies. Jan van Nes was one of the students, studying Medicine at the time, that was presented with this dilemma. He chose the latter and refused to sign the declaration, as did 86% of his fellow students.

Students who did not sign the declaration were required to report to the 'Arbeitseinsatz,' after May 6th, 1941. Van Nes was summoned to report, after which he would be sent towards Germany to work there. Van Nes did not see this as an option and went into hiding, nevertheless was found, arrested, and sent to a barracks camp for Polish and Russian war prisoners near Vienna. Here, he worked as a nurse and did everything in his power to care for wounded

prisoners until his death in 1944. He passed away in a nearby hospital as a result of poor hygiene and a lack of antibiotics. Attempts by his father - also a doctor - to come to him with the needed antibiotics were in vain.

Where van Nes was sent to Austria after refusing to sign the declaration of loyalty, Jørgen Bech was able to find a place as a resident in a hospital in Arnhem. Here, he attempted to help imprisoned Jews, who were admitted for treatment, escape without success. In February of 1944, he successfully helped an imprisoned Dutch woman escape from the hospital. Hereafter, he was discovered. Bech could no longer continue his studies and went into hiding in the Hague. Here he joined a resistance group named the K.P., where he carried out assignments together with student of Indology Ed Maier (Eduard Victor Maier). In the beginning of September, 1944, they took part in a raid on a black market cafe in Leiden, soon later were recognized and consequently were arrested. At the end of September, after hours of interrogation, both students were executed at the "Offem" estate.

Despite their tragic deaths during the war, their efforts were not in vain. Van Nes and Bech were presented with difficult moral dilemmas but stuck to their principles. Both students prioritized humanity and were determined to do what was in their power to help fellow humans.

Today, we can still learn a lot from the stories of these two students. In contemporary society we also see ourselves confronted with moral dilemmas. Although they perhaps seem difficult to compare with the dilemmas in the Second World War, the core message remains applicable. There may be differences in cultures, beliefs, and there are language barriers, points that van Nes and Bech also experienced. But eventually we are all human. In the Netherlands today, we can luckily say that we live in freedom. In other parts of the world, war is still raging. More recently closer to here, in Ukraine. Large groups of people have fled their country to find refuge in other places, some of whom arrive here in the Netherlands. At first, it may seem like there are apparent distances created by cultural differences or language barriers. But if we look at the stories of Van Nes and Bech, this does not, and should not, make a difference. Let us try to learn from them, that if we all would be a little more selfless in life, and lend each other a helping hand when needed, we can come closer together as human beings.

