

## 10 Koepelgevangenis

The prison in Wilhelminastraat in the Lombok district, West Arnhem, is known as the Koepelgevangenis (Dome Prison), or in short, the Koepel (the Dome). During the war the Germans made use of the prison. Thus, in 1944 members of the resistance were also held in the Koepel, men who were so important to the resistance that they had to be freed. Two successful 'releases' carried out in February and May 1944 are described. The second rescue involved a resistance man whose cover name was Frits de Zwerver.

During the Battle of Arnhem fighting took place between German and British forces on a number of occasions in the vicinity of the Koepel. This twice led to the release of groups of detainees. How they made their way to freedom is told in this story. In addition, the Germans put a group of 27 labourers to work at Deelen airfield. These people then found themselves in a dangerous situation because of the fighting. Approximately 600 refugees also sought shelter in the Koepel during the Battle of Arnhem.



[History of the Koepel](#)

[Use of the Koepel by the Germans](#)

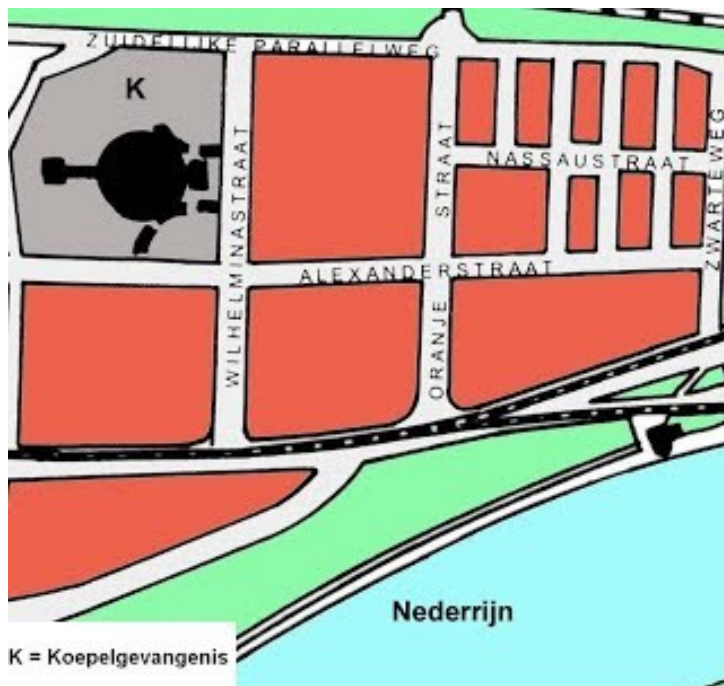
[Raids on the Koepel by the Resistance](#)

[The Koepel during the Battle of Arnhem](#)

### History of the Koepel

One of the striking nineteenth century buildings that Arnhem still possesses is the prison, better known as 'de Koepelgevangenis' or 'de Koepel'. It was designed in 1882 by architect Johan Frederik Metzelaar who also designed the prisons in Breda and Haarlem. It was built in Wilhelminastraat between 1882 and 1886 in the new city district of Lombok, and could house 189 detainees.

The Koepelgevangenis also housed (and still does) remand prisoners awaiting their legal process. The prison remained in use during the war years.



Map showing the situation around the Koepelgevangenis in 1944. (Copyright F. van Lunteren)

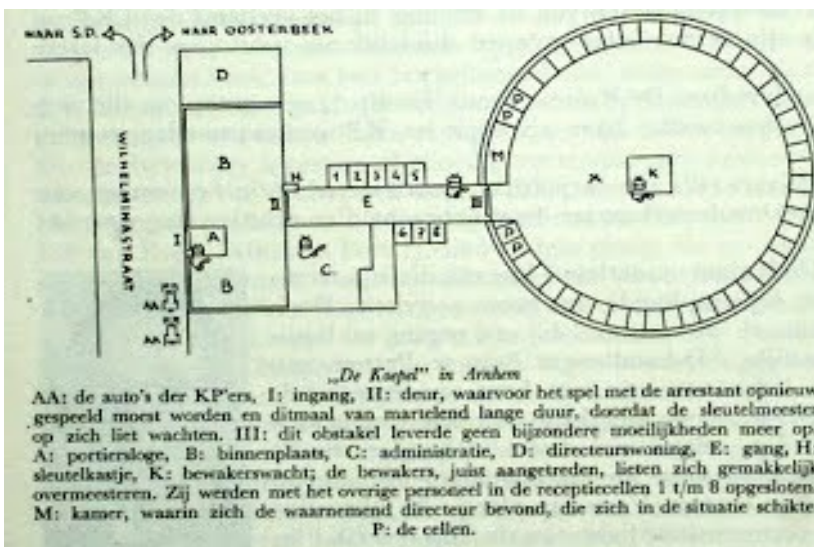
## Use of the Koepel by the Germans

From 1941 onwards the Germans not only allowed the imprisonment of suspected criminals, members of the resistance were also jailed. In that year the Geheime Staats Polizei (Gestapo) had a number of prisoners moved to the penitentiary in Scheveningen or to prisons in Germany for interrogation. These prisoners rarely returned to the Arnhem jail .[1]

The number of prisoners in the Koepelgevangenis increased steadily during the war years. In 1942 the population was under 200, but by September 1944 this had grown to 249 – sixty more than the prison was designed to take. The detainees wore khaki overalls and in most cases were housed two to a cell,[2] sometimes even three.[3]

During the German occupation the Koepelgevangenis also served as a transit camp for prisoners sent by train from Germany. These were mostly sent straight on to other jails or to the Rijkswerkinrichting (State Labour Institution) in Veenhuizen. On 1 March 1944 a hundred detainees were sent for a day's work to Deelen airfield, north of Arnhem, which had been bombed by allied aircraft.[4] Because the airfield became a more frequent target for attack it was eventually decided to keep smaller groups of prisoners permanently on site to fill bomb craters and to clear shrapnel.

## Raids on the Koepel by the Germans



Map of the Koepelgevangenis anno 1944. (From: 'Het grote gebod. Gedenkboek van het verzet in LO en LKP', part I, page 488)

Two raids were carried out on the Koepelgevangenis in 1944 in which an important resistance man was freed. The first raid was carried out on 18 February. A small group of Nijmegen resistance men disguised as Sicherheitsdienst (SD; Secret Police) personnel said they had come to pick up a detainee for questioning, one of the arrested resistance men. The raid succeeded and the resistance man was freed.

The most spectacular raid on the Koepelgevangenis was made on 11 May 1944. It was carried out by a larger, national resistance group, which managed to free two imprisoned resistance members. The following entry was made about the successful raid in the Koepelgevangenis register:[5]

11.05.1944 "Today at 20.00 hours an armed raid was carried out on the Penitentiary by 8 to 10 armed persons including 2 in Military Police uniforms and 1 person clad as a pseudo handcuffed prisoner. The raiders succeeded in abducting two people imprisoned by order of the Secret Police."

One of the men freed was the reverend Frits Slomp from Heemse near Hardenberg (Overijssel). Slomp was a Reformed Church minister who played an active part in the resistance. He organized safe houses for evaders, wrote illegal brochures calling for resistance to the Germans and at the end of 1942 set up the Landelijke Organisatie voor Hulp aan Onderduikers (LO) {The National Organization for Help for Evaders}. The SD discovered his cover name, Frits de Zwerver, and for months tried unsuccessfully to get their hands on him.

On 1 May 1944 Frits Slomp's luck ran out during an identity check in Ruurlo: his identity card proved to be false. An illegal brochure was also found in his coat. He was arrested and sent from the police station in Lochem to the Koepelgevangenis in Arnhem. A reliable policeman who knew Slomp sent a message to the local resistance in Lochem telling them of Slomp's arrest.

The leaders of the LO realized that this could spell danger if he was interrogated by the SD and decided to release him from the 'Koepel'. Information about where he was being held in the building was obtained from Warder Joop van Veldhoven. A plan was conceived for the release of Slomp during the afternoon of 12 May, at a time when few personnel would be present.

However, during the previous afternoon it became known that Slomp was scheduled for transport elsewhere the following morning, so out of necessity the raid was brought forward to the early evening of the 11th. Two resistance men from Twente [6], dressed as Dutch policemen, reported at the prison entrance with a "captive"[7]

They told the gatekeeper that they had to take their charge to Nijmegen, but they would be unable to get there on time. Could he be locked up in the Koepelgevangenis for one night?

The gatekeeper opened the gate without demur, but a moment later found himself looking down the barrels of three pistols. Frits Slomp and a member of the Twente resistance, Henk Kruithof from the LO, were fetched from their cells and taken by car to Oosterbeek. From there the group split up and the released prisoners were taken to safe addresses.[8] Both remained in hiding until the end of the war.

## The Koepel during the Battle of Arnhem

In September 1944 the Koepelgevangenis was close to the advance route of the 3rd British Parachute Battalion which was heading for the road bridge in Arnhem. On Sunday morning the 17th, British aircraft bombed a number of targets in Arnhem and a few ack-ack sites in and around the city. The Willemskazerne (a barracks) was one of the buildings hit during the bombing. A few hours later, shortly after midday, gliders and parachutists were seen descending to the west of Arnhem. It looked as if liberation was at hand for the prisoners in the Koepelgevangenis.

### The death of gatekeeper Michels

The euphoria faded in the early evening when fighting broke out between British parachutists and German soldiers in Wilhelminastraat. Gatekeeper Frederik Michels from Nijmegen slid the small hatch in the prison gate open to take a look outside. Because it was almost dark outside, and a light was on in the gatehouse, his face was clearly silhouetted. British soldiers promptly fired at the hatch. Michels fell back mortally wounded and died shortly after.

This tragic incident was also recorded in the register of the Koepelgevangenis:[9]

17.09.1944 "This evening at p.m. 20.00 hours, Warden M., who was in the gatehouse, was fatally wounded during the street fighting in Wilhelminastraat between German and British patrols."

### Labourers for Deelen airfield in danger

Things quietened down during the night of 17/18 September, but on Monday morning the battle restarted in all its fury. A group of 27 prisoners who were housed at Deelen military airfield in order to repair the runways there were sent back to the Koepelgevangenis by the Germans. Accompanied by a number of prison officers they were marched back to Arnhem.[10]

When they reached Noordelijke Parallelweg they were fired on by a group of German soldiers who had just dug in along the north side of the railway line. Like their fellow prisoners in the Koepelgevangenis, the labourers wore khaki-coloured overalls, and the Germans mistook them for British soldiers. The guards quickly managed to convince the Germans that they were shooting at police officers and prisoners, and there were no deaths or injuries. Using the railway bridge at Oranjestraat they eventually reached the prison.[11]

This brought the prison population to 275. One prisoner was in hospital in Arnhem with appendicitis and peritonitis.

The fighting on Utrechtseweg increased around noon when the Germans counter-attacked using infantry supported by self-propelled guns. Early in the afternoon German mortars joined the action and there began a constant rain of mortar bombs.[12]

## **First release of prisoners**

The prison governor A. Zondag decided to open the cell doors of the less serious offenders and offer them the choice of staying in the jail or leaving. They were free in any case because he could no longer guarantee their safety. The store where their civilian clothing was kept was under fire and could not be reached. The prison officers advised them to stay until it was quieter and they could put on their own clothes.

However, twenty or so prisoners decided to leave at once. On clogs and still wearing their khaki overalls they left the prison. Most chose to go to the right and walk to Utrechtseweg or in the direction of Alexanderstraat, parallel to Utrechtseweg. Others decided to head west via Zuidelijke Parallelweg towards the British liberators.[13]

In Alexanderstraat the Germans opened fire on the prisoners, thinking it was a British advance. A few prisoners were killed and the rest spread out. Fifty-nine-year-old Joseph H. van Vijnck was one of the prisoners who tried to get away to the west via Zuidelijke Parallelweg. He was a cycle dealer from Amsterdam and was serving a fifteen-month jail sentence for handling stolen goods. Van Vijnck's group were turned back by the British.

They could no longer use Alexanderstraat because fighting was going on there. They finally decided to cross Utrechtseweg and walk to Oosterbeek via Klingelbeekseweg. But before they reached Oosterbeek-Laag station they were stopped by poulterer Posthouwer, who lived in Klingelbeekseweg.[14]

According to Posthouwer it would be too dangerous to carry on because the British parachutists at the viaduct and station were attacking a nearby brickworks. Besides which, the German line ended here – if they continued on they would enter a no-mans land between the Germans and the British.

The prisoners decided to split up. Van Vijnck and a mate went north and ended up in the Mariëndaal estate in Oosterbeek. Their dead bodies were found after the fighting and were buried in a field grave in the woods. After the liberation they were reburied as unknown in a mass grave in the General Cemetery South in Oosterbeek.

## **Second release of prisoners**

On 19 September 1944 British parachutists tried once more to battle their way through to the road bridge in Arnhem to help their surrounded comrades of the 2nd Parachute Battalion and a few smaller groups. The prison was again under artillery fire and the prison governor took the decision to release all the detainees still in the prison. The following entry was made in the prison register:[15]

19.09.1944 (.....) "The detainees were advised to remain temporarily in the institution for their own safety, and they were told that if they nevertheless chose to leave it would be entirely at their own risk. Of the 250 prisoners, 57 decided voluntarily to remain in the institution."

Once outside the prison the majority of the released prisoners were immediately detained by German soldiers and taken to the Ortskommandatur in Apeldoornseweg, Arnhem. From the military police barracks in Arnhem they were taken by lorry to the penitentiary in Zutphen. A number of prisoners who got away lost their lives in the fighting in and around Alexanderstraat.[16]

A group of about 50 detainees succeeded in reaching the centre of Oosterbeek by way of Klingelbeekseweg and Oosterbeek-Laag station. They were stopped at a British command post near the old church in Benedendorpsweg and arrested. Two members of the resistance, Jan ter Horst and Ir. F. de Soet, took the group to a school. However, this refuge turned out to be unsafe and the prisoners wanted to get home as quickly as possible.[17]

De Soet rang the police station in Oosterbeek, but because of the fighting no help could be expected from the police. Jan ter Horst recalled:

"In Oosterbeek-Laag the freed prisoners were taken across the river on the Driel ferry. I operated the ferry myself because the ferryman [Peter Hensen] remained indoors. I never heard anything more of the fate of the released detainees." [18]

### **Civilians shelter in the Koepel**

The same day that most of the prisoners left the jail, many inhabitants of the Lombok district sought shelter in the Koepelgevangenis. Approximately 600 people were housed in the cells on the ground and first floors. The following day gatekeeper Michels was buried in the prison grounds in front of the church.<sup>[19]</sup> By now it had become considerably quieter because, with the exception of the men at the road bridge, the British airborne had been pushed back to Oosterbeek.

On Saturday evening 23 September the Germans ordered the evacuation of the prison within an hour.

After the liberation in May 1945 the prison finally resumed its normal role, but the battle damage caused to the prison complex was not repaired completely until the end of that year. After the war none of the released prisoners was required to complete his sentence or remand time. The exact number of prisoners killed in the fighting after release is not known. It was probably limited to a handful.<sup>[20]</sup>

### **The missing Van Vijnck**



Post-war aerial photo of the Koepelgevangenis and surroundings. (KLM Aerocarto Collection)

In 1995 an investigation was started into the whereabouts of the missing Joseph Van Vijnck by Peter Danz, a great-nephew of Joseph's, in consultation with one of Joseph's sons. From various documents and from eyewitnesses accounts it appeared that, when found, one of the two unknown men in a field grave in the woods of the Mariëndaal estate had a letter on his person bearing the name 'Van Vijnck'.

On 28 February 1997 permission was given to open the mass grave at the Oosterbeek cemetery and the remains of the two unknown men were exhumed. From the information already gathered it was possible to confirm that one of the bodies was indeed that of Van Vijnck.

After fifty-three years the fate of the missing Van Vijnck was finally clarified. On 2 May 1997 he was reinterred in the Municipal Cemetery South in Oosterbeek, this time under his own name.

- [1] G.J. Mentink (ed.), 100 jaar Gastvrijheid in Onvrijheid. Gedenkboek 100 jaar Koepelgevangenis Arnhem (Arnhem, 1986), 41.
- [2] Letter from Peter Danz to Geert Maassen (Gemeente Archive Renkum), 18 February 1996.
- [3] E-mail from Peter Danz to Frank van Lunteren, 6 November 2006.
- [4] Mentink (ed.), 100 jaar Gastvrijheid in Onvrijheid. 43-44.
- [5] Ditto
- [6] They were Johannes ter Horst and Geert Schoonman. The latter came from Zaandam, but had joined his girlfriend's resistance group in Twente. Jan Hof, De dubbele Slag in Arnhem. De KP-kraken van de Koepel en het Huis van Bewaring (Baarn, 2004), 120-123.
- [7] The 26 year-old resistance member Harrie Saathof 'played' the detainee. Jan Hof, De dubbele Slag in Arnhem, 120-123.
- [8] Johan van Hulzen and Ad Goede, 'Gevangenisdeuren zwaaien open', deel I, II en III in: De Zwer-  
ver, 28 June, 5 July and 12 July 1947.
- [9] Mentink (ed.), 100 jaar Gastvrijheid in Onvrijheid. 44.
- [10] E-mail from Peter Danz to William van Vijnck, 19 January 1997.
- [11] C.A. Dekkers and L.P.J. Vroemen, De Zwarte herfst; Arnhem 1944; de worsteling van mensen in oorlogstijd; authentiek relaas van ooggetuigen (Arnhem, 1986), 63.
- [12] War Diary 3rd Parachute Battalion, 18 September 1944.
- [13] Letter from Peter Danz to Geert Maassen (Gemeente Archive Renkum), 6 February 1996.
- [14] E-mail from Peter Danz to William van Vijnck, 7 October 1996.
- [15] Mentink (ed.), 100 jaar Gastvrijheid in Onvrijheid. 45.
- [16] Report Gemeente Police Ede No. 124H/1947, 11 February 1947.
- [17] Ir. F. de Soet, 'De laatste dagen van het huis Vredenhof', Niet tevergeefs (Arnhem, 1946), 34-36.
- [18] Letter from Jan ter Horst to Geert Maassen (Gemeente Archive Renkum), 1 April 1996.
- [19] Michels was reinterred in the Moscowa cemetery in Arnhem on 26 November 1945.
- [20] Telephone conversation between Peter Danz and Frank van Lunteren, 5 November 2006.