

Johtje Vos, Rescuer Choices of Courage

Johtje Vos was born Johanna Kuyper on December 29, 1909, in Amersfoort, the Netherlands to Guillaume and Henrietta Kuyper. She had two sisters, Alida and Maria. Her father was a career officer in the Dutch Army and the military commander of the town of Leiden, where Johtje spent most of her childhood. Because her grandfather had been the prime minister of the Netherlands, as a child, Johtje was accustomed to life among political figures. Johtje and her family were also devout members of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

When Johtje was about nineteen, she moved to Paris to work. She married her first husband, Heinrich Molenaar, a German artist, and gained German citizenship. They moved back to the Netherlands to a town called Laren, and had two daughters, Barbara and Hetty. In 1940, when the Germans invaded the Netherlands, many Jews attempted to flee; those who remained needed to hide to avoid detection. Johtje decided to help the Jews, so she joined an underground organization known as “the Group,” made up of Dutch citizens who worked together to find hiding places for Jews.

In 1942, Johtje married her second husband, a Dutch agriculturalist named Aart Vos. He had a son, Peter, from his first marriage. Throughout the war, Johtje and Aart housed thirty-two Jews—although never more than fourteen at one time. Conditions were usually difficult; food, divided equally among the many inhabitants, was scarce. Johtje remembered that everyone, including her children, was slowly starving during the war.

Sometimes, however, circumstances aided the Vos’ rescue efforts. For example, Johtje and her daughters received double ration cards because they were German citizens, which helped provide more food for those people they was hiding. In addition, with the help of a policeman who was also a member of the underground group, the family was able to secure a telephone. That policeman had advance knowledge of official raids, and would ring twice and hang up to alert Johtje that the police were on their way to her home.

In May 1945, news came on a clandestine radio that the Netherlands had been liberated. Johtje remembered that she, her family, and all the Jews hiding in her home screamed in excitement for days. The Canadian Army arrived, and Johtje, her family, and neighbors stood in the streets, thanking the soldiers for being there.

After the war, Johtje and Aart had two sons, Sebastiaan and Aart, and adopted a third son, Dominique. In 1951, Johtje, Aart, and their six children immigrated to the United States. Johtje worked as an author and journalist and wrote three books. In 1982, both Johtje and Aart were recognized as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem for risking their lives to save Jews during the war. Through the years, Johtje maintained contact with many of those she had hidden. At the time of her interview in 1996, Johtje was a widow and living in New York.