

## Jacoba van Tongeren

*The woman who led a resistance group* By Paul van Tongeren

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*Paul van Tongeren has established an international network of peace organisations and wrote a book about Jacoba van Tongeren.*

**Jacoba van Tongeren (1903–1967) was an Amsterdam nurse who saved the lives of thousands of people during the German occupation, but her story languished in obscurity until 2015. Between 1940 and 1945, Jacoba led a resistance group of some 140 men and women. She came up with a unique code to refer to the members of her group and people in hiding: the letters of their names were converted into numbers, and the group members knew one another only by their number. In 1944–45, she was the only woman in the upper echelons of the Amsterdam resistance.**

It was not until 70 years after the liberation, in 2015, that Jacoba's life story was revealed. Three years earlier Paul van Tongeren, a nephew, had come across his aunt's memoirs in an archive in The Hague, where they had been gathering dust for 50 years. Jacoba's experiences during the war turned out to be extraordinary. Paul edited the handwritten texts into a book, *Jacoba van Tongeren and the unknown resistance heroes of Group 2000*. The first copy was presented to the then mayor of Amsterdam, Eberhard van der Laan, in March 2015.

### Youngest child

Jacoba was born near Bandoeng (now Bandung) in the Dutch East Indies. She was the youngest of the three children of Hermannus van Tongeren (1876–1941), a military engineer in the Dutch East Indies Army, and Jeanne van Tongeren-Holle (1870–1958), a teacher. Jeanne, who had wanted only two children, struggled with the care of her third child. When Hermannus was sent to construct bridges in Aceh province in 1909, he took the young Jacoba with him. Together with a *baboe*—a nanny—they lived in a mobile home provided by the army in the Sumatran jungle. Hermannus raised his daughter as best he could, emphasising responsibility and discipline, but Jacoba's upbringing was an isolated one, in a man's world surrounded by soldiers. She developed unique leadership qualities at a young age.

In 1916, when Jacoba was 13, the Van Tongerens returned to the Netherlands. They settled in the Johannes Verhulststraat in Amsterdam and Jacoba attended high school. She then trained as a nurse, but fell seriously ill in 1928 with a streptococcal infection, leaving her too sick to sit her final exams. Her father rented a house in Groenekan, in the countryside, where she was cared for by a housekeeper. After eight years of treatment, she relocated to the TB sanatorium in Amersfoort, where she befriended a nurse by the name of Nel Wateler. In 1937, Jacoba and Nel returned to Amsterdam and took up residence in the Antillenstraat.

Meanwhile, Jacoba's father had retired from the military and become active in public life. From 1929 Hermannus served as Grand Master of the Order of Freemasons in the Netherlands. In 1937 he was appointed major general for his services to the Dutch East Indies Army. When Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany, Hermannus frequently and publicly criticised the racist politics of the Nazis. Freemasons strive for international brotherhood, individual spiritual freedom and personal development. Hermannus's ideals were in direct

opposition with National Socialism, which in turn regarded Masonic thought as corrupt and reprehensible.

Father and daughter Van Tongeren shared a strong bond and a deep sense of mutual trust. It was only natural that, after the German invasion, they both sided with the resistance.

### **Resistance newspaper**

Shortly after the invasion, a stranger made contact with Jacoba: a young local man seeking to launch a resistance newspaper called *Vrij Nederland*. Could the Van Tongerens help him with the required contacts and resources? Jacoba quickly became the liaison between *Vrij Nederland* and her father, who gave money to the founders of the newspaper and connected them with his contacts among the Freemasons. He even let the editors use his typewriter. The first mimeographed copy of *Vrij Nederland* appeared on 31 August 1940.

The first generation of resistance fighters was inexperienced, overconfident and indiscreet. Worse, they underestimated the cruelty of the Nazi regime. In the spring of 1941, almost all employees of *Vrij Nederland* were arrested. Several were shot, the remainder placed in detention. Jacoba had no choice but to break off all contact with the newspaper and go into hiding.

During this period she contemplated withdrawing from the resistance. The arrest of the *Vrij Nederland* staff affected her deeply. Moreover, her father had been imprisoned in October 1940 for his work with the Freemasons. In March 1941 he had been transferred to a German concentration camp, where he died within weeks of illness and exhaustion. Early one morning, en route to a secret address where an English pilot who had been shot down was waiting for his identity card, Jacoba was in a cheerless mood. She looked out of the train window at the flower beds in full bloom, and realised she could not simply leave the Netherlands to its fate.<sup>[1]</sup> She resolved to carry on her father's work, keeping in mind two pieces of advice he had given her. 'Make a plan! What are you trying to achieve with your resistance work?' And: 'Never use real names—the resistance group that uses names puts lives in danger!'

After the arrest of the *Vrij Nederland* staff, Jacoba took this advice to heart. On founding her own resistance group in mid-1941, she came up with codenames for her employees and the people in hiding to whom they gave assistance. Using a military coding method she had learnt from her father, she converted letters into numbers, and from then on the members of her group called each other by a number. Jacoba herself took the codename *2000*.

### **Queen of food stamps**

When the war broke out, Jacoba was a church social worker. In 1941, with the support of the Central Church Council, she established a national network within the Reformed Church. Group 2000 was to aid people in hiding, including Jews, resistance fighters and young men seeking to avoid forced labour in Germany. The group provided false identity cards, a particular talent of Gerrit Jan van der Veen and Frieda Belinfante. They also organised secret addresses and distributed food stamps procured by the group's assault team, which specialised in raiding distribution offices. Jacoba even designed a special vest, secreted within which she could transport five thousand food stamps at a time. She often delivered the stamps in person; this was how she became known as the *Bonnenkoningin* (queen of food stamps).

In 1944, some 4,500 people hidden in the Amsterdam region depended entirely on Group 2000 for food. Jacoba divided the map of Amsterdam into districts, and group members would meet around lunchtime in local buildings of the Reformed Church to share out food stamps and addresses. In addition, Group 2000 ran a press service and an illegal radio station. One group, including the resistance hero Truus Wijsmuller, sent food packages to prisoners in Westerbork and German concentration camps.

In 1944 Jacoba was invited to sit on behalf of Group 2000 on the Council of Resistance, the umbrella body of resistance organisations in the Netherlands. She attended the secret meetings of the Council herself or sent the leader of the assault team in her place. She also worked closely with Henk Dieneske, head of the National Organisation for Assistance to People in Hiding in North Holland.

As early as 1940 Jacoba's father, with great foresight, had raised a sum of 600,000 guilders from Freemason circles.<sup>[2]</sup> Jacoba used the money not only to fund the work of Group 2000, but also to give 'startup grants' to the resistance newspaper *Vrij Nederland*, the Identity Cards Register and the National Support Fund. From mid-1944 the group also received substantial contributions from the Reformed Church.

### **Ethical dilemmas**

Jacob van Tongeren was an extraordinary woman with iron discipline and an inspiring spirit. She was guided by the Gospel and shared her faith with the members of her group. She advocated nonviolent resistance, describing her resistance work as 'peace work in wartime'. Aware that resistance work involved spiritual and ethical dilemmas, she organised biweekly meetings led by Amsterdam pastors to address such questions as 'May I steal, lie or kill?' In 2017, the Protestant Church in Amsterdam established a biennial Jacoba van Tongeren lecture to honour her legacy and keep her spirit alive.

Jacob was an exceptional organiser. She led her group with a firm hand and a clear hierarchy, but also with creativity, the unique code she developed being a good example. When the celebrated resistance fighter Henk van Randwijk, chairman of the Council of Resistance, insisted that a resistance group could not be led by a woman, she refused to be turned away and found support among the other resistance leaders. After the liberation in July 1945, she submitted a report almost a hundred pages long to the Commander of the Dutch Armed Forces, Prince Bernhard. When he learned of the accomplishments of Group 2000, he said to Jacoba: 'You could have done the work of ten generals!'

Jacob was proved herself a successful leader. Her group suffered limited loss of life. Thanks to the group's discretion and the use of her code, most of the people in hiding also survived the war. But the stress of the occupation and the loss of her father, her brother and many others took a heavy toll on Jacob. The lung disease that had previously required long-term treatment flared up again after the war, leaving her almost permanently bedridden from the 1950s until her death in 1967.

### **Sense of guilt**

But there was another tragic side to her life. Still pained by the fact that her mother had rejected her and exiled her to the jungle all those years ago, Jacob was in need of maternal warmth. After the war, exhausted, she was lovingly cared for by her dear friend Nel Waterer. They moved to Bergen together, but Jacob was plagued by the idea that she had not done enough to save Jews. She also felt guilty for having failed to prevent the infamous

Weteringplantsoen reprisal in Amsterdam on 12 March 1945, shortly before the liberation, when the Nazis publicly executed 30 innocent civilians.

On 9 March, the Gestapo had invaded Jacoba's office and found the group's records of people in hiding. Because the records were encoded, the information was of no use to them. Jacoba instructed her group to hold back as long as the Nazis did not look under the floor, where the key to the code was hidden. Against her orders, four members of her assault team carried out an armed robbery at the office with the aim of bringing the key to safety. During the subsequent shooting, a German officer was fatally hit. The Nazis took their cruel revenge in the form of the Weteringplantsoen executions.

For the rest of her life, Jacoba was haunted by the deaths of those 30 victims. In the 1960s, conscience-stricken, she contacted the well-known radio minister Alje Klamer, who advised her to process her trauma through writing. Jacoba subsequently penned her war memoirs in the form of many personal letters to Klamer. Shortly before her death, he sent Jacoba's spiritual legacy, running to some 330 handwritten pages, to the Freemasons' archive, where they were stored deep in a cupboard.

In 1990, Jacoba van Tongeren was posthumously awarded the title Righteous Among the Nations by Israel's Yad Vashem. Until then, her role in the resistance had fallen into obscurity. In his seminal work *De Bezetting* ('The Occupation', 1990), the historian Loe de Jong mentioned her name several times, but only in passing, for his definition of 'resistance' revolved primarily around armed resistance with a direct impact on the occupier. De Jong focused on swashbuckling men who committed acts of sabotage and espionage. Helping people in hiding did not, in his view, count as resistance. Nowadays, opinions have changed.

### **Ignored**

De Jong heaped praise on the resistance fighter Henk van Randwijk, Jacoba's adversary in 1944–1945 at the Council of Resistance, but virtually ignored Jacoba. The view presented to the Dutch public was that a woman could not possibly have led a resistance group. Jacoba was deeply hurt by this rejection of her contribution to the resistance effort. She sought neither honour nor fame: what bothered her was the lack of recognition of the wartime services provided by the members of Group 2000.

And so Group 2000 only narrowly avoided being relegated to the footnotes of history. At the launch of Paul van Tongeren's book in *De Rode Hoed* on 21 March 2015, Mayor Van der Laan finally gave Jacoba and her 140 group members the recognition they deserved. Shortly after the book launch, the Amsterdam city council announced that it would name a bridge after Jacoba.

Marjan Schwegman, the then director of the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, subsequently reworked the lecture she gave during the book launch into an essay for the newspaper *Trouw* on the neglected role of female resistance fighters during the German occupation. This sparked renewed interest in the Netherlands in the role that women played in the fight against the Nazis.

In 2016, City Storyteller Karel Baracs created *De Bonnenkoningin*, a show about Jacoba's life based on her nephew's book. Hundreds of Amsterdam schoolchildren were treated to the performance, followed by a talk by Paul van Tongeren. The show was filmed in 2018 to be used for educational purposes.

Jacoba was overlooked in the writing of the history of the war for years: because of her modesty, because she was known to many only as '2000', and not least because she was a woman. She died in obscurity in 1967.

### More information

**Jacobavantongeren.nl**, website with link to the video recording of *De Bonnenkoningin* with the talk by Paul van Tongeren, including a viewing guide.

**Jacoba van Tongeren en de onbekende verzetshelden van Groep 2000 (1940–1945)**, Paul van Tongeren and Trudy Admiraal, 5th extended edition (Aspekt 2018).

**DVD** of the book launch on 21 March 2015 and 17 brief interviews with relatives of the members of Group 2000.

**Vrouwenlexicon**, entry on Jacoba van Tongeren.

**Juffrouw 2000, Jacoba van Tongeren, vergeten verzetsvrouw**, *Vrij Nederland*, 18 March 2015, [www.vn.nl/juffrouw-2000/](http://www.vn.nl/juffrouw-2000/).

**Jacoba van Tongeren, verzetsstrijdster tegen wil en dank**, Marjan Schwegman, NIOD director, lecture during book launch on 21 March 2015, [tiny.cc/K5MSJVT](http://tiny.cc/K5MSJVT).

**Hoe vrouwen uit het verzet verdwenen**, essay by Marjan Schwegman, *Trouw*, 18 April 2015.

**Beknopt historisch verslag van de werkzaamheden van Groep 2000**, Jacoba van Tongeren (1946), [www.niod.nl](http://www.niod.nl) > Bibliotheek.

### Image captions



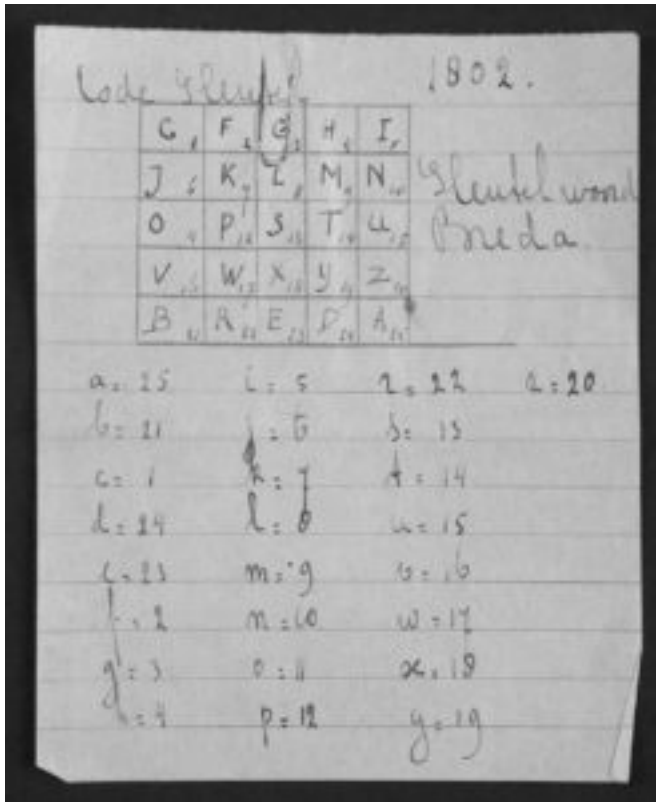
Jacoba van Tongeren, year unknown.



Jacoba van Tongeren, probably in the Vondelpark in the 1930s.



*Ik houd van Holland* ('I love Holland'), pages from Jacoba van Tongeren's album. In spring 1941, she seemed to be losing heart after her father's death in Sachsenhausen and the arrest of her fellow resistance fighters from *Vrij Nederland*. Photo: Rogier Veldman.



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Jacoba developed a code in which the letters of the names of group members and people in hiding were changed to numbers. This code saved many hundreds of lives. Photo: Rogier Veldman.



Jacoba was nicknamed *De Bonnenkoningin*, the queen of food stamps. She delivered food stamps to people in hiding and even designed a special vest so that she could secretly transport thousands of stamps at a time. Photo: Rogier Veldman.



On 4 May 2016, six Amsterdam bridges were named after female resistance heroes. The author of this article, Paul van Tongeren, poses with his wife Els on the bridge named after his aunt. Photo: Mieke Baracs.

[1] *Jacoba van Tongeren en de onbekende verzetshelden van Groep 2000*, p. 128. See also image.

[2] This sum would be worth some €4 million in today's currency.