

TWO VOICES FROM WESTERBORK:  
ETTY HILLESUM AND PHILIP MECHANICUS  
ON THE TRANSPORT FROM CAMP WESTERBORK ON  
24 AUGUST 1943

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*Zuckerman is a novelist, and it is the way of the novelist to take the raw material of life and to transform it into something that is no longer life but language, language in the service of a surmise.*

Philip Roth<sup>1</sup>

Almost one hundred trains left Camp Westerbork for Central Europe. The majority of deportations took place between July 1942 and September 1943. Transports also took place before and after this period, but less frequently.<sup>2</sup> The subject of this article is the transport of 24 August 1943. The writer Etty Hillesum and the journalist Philip Mechanicus left extensive notes behind about this transport: Hillesum in her letter and Mechanicus in his diary entry on that date. Etty Hillesum's letter is one of forty that she sent from the camp. Two of them are devoted entirely to Camp Westerbork and were published clandestinely in the autumn of 1943.<sup>3</sup> The text by Philip Mechanicus is

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\* Translated by Jack Santcross. It filled me with great joy that Jack Santcross accepted to translate my text. He is the English translator of two important books by Abel J. Herzberg, *Amor Fati* and *Between Two Streams: A Diary from Bergen-Belsen* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997). Jack Santcross was only eight years old when arrested in Amsterdam and deported first to Camp Westerbork in 1943 and in January 1944 to Bergen-Belsen. *Amor Fati* still needs to find an English publisher.

<sup>1</sup> Hermione Lee, "Age makes a difference: Hermione Lee talks with Philip Roth about his novel 'Exit Ghost,'" *The New Yorker*, 1 October 2007, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Willy Lindwer lists 93 deportation trains. Two transports departed in the fourth quarter of 1943. In the first three months of 1944 trains departed weekly again, after which the departures decreased considerably. According to Lindwer's list, the last transport left on 13 September 1944. Cf. Willy Lindwer, *Kamp van hoop en wanhoop: Getuigen van Westerbork, 1939-1945* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 1990), 256.

<sup>3</sup> Etty Hillesum, *Drie brieven van den kunstschilder Johannes van der Pluym (1843-1912): Met twee reproducties*. Uitgegeven en van een toelichting voorzien door Mevr. A.C.G. Botterman-Van der Pluym (Apeldoorn: Boekenfonds 'Die Raeckse', 1917). Actually,

part of the diary that he kept during his stay in the camp. An important element of the transport, namely the loading of the deportees, was witnessed by both of them together. In the summer of 1943, the two authors were regularly in each other's company.

In this contribution, I shall consider the texts by Etty Hillesum and Philip Mechanicus with the following questions in mind:

- a) What kind of information did the authors intend to convey with their descriptions of the terrible transport of that night?
- b) Exactly how are the two texts constructed? Which topics did the authors consider important to raise?
- c) Why did the authors choose to write at all? For we are not concerned here with 'normal' correspondence to relatives and friends who had been left behind, but with the question why Mechanicus kept a diary and why Hillesum wrote two 'reports' about Camp Westerbork.

### 1. *The Sources*

My study is based on a limited number of primary sources: the diary *In Dépôt* (English title: *Waiting for Death: A Diary*) and the letters by Philip Mechanicus, and the diary and letters by Etty Hillesum.<sup>4</sup> However, the history of these sources is complicated. Firstly, the texts were published without the authors having been able to influence them in any way. I want to dwell on this for a moment because it is highly doubtful whether these texts would have seen the light of day if the authors had survived the deportations: in any event not in their present form. I find it disturbing to assume without question that the authors wrote their

the book was printed by P. van Leeuwen te Nieuw Vennep; cf. Dirk de Jong (ed.), *Het vrije boek in onvrije tijd: Bibliografie van illegale en clandestiene belletrise* (Schiedam: Interbook International, 1978), no. 664 (pp. 203–204).

<sup>4</sup> Philip Mechanicus, *In Dépôt: Dagboek uit Westerbork van Philip Mechanicus*. Ingeleid door Prof. Dr. J. Presser (Amsterdam: Polak & Van Gennep, 1964). English translation: *Waiting for Death: A Diary* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1984). A German translation was published in 1993: *Im Depot: Tagebuch aus Westerbork*, eds. Klaus Bittermann & Eike Geisel (Berlin: Edition Tiamat, 1993). A new Dutch edition was published in 2008, with an introduction by D. Mulder; the text reproduces the 1964 edition, including Presser's introduction. Part of Mechanicus' letters are published in: Philip Mechanicus, *Ik woon zoals je weet drie-hoog: Brieven uit Westerbork* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 1987).

diaries with the intention of having them published after the war.<sup>5</sup> This presumption does not respect the status of the texts as raw material, or drafts. The second point to which I wish to draw attention is the fact that both authors wrote their texts during the war, under extreme conditions. We have at our disposal only a few Dutch texts that were written during the period of Nazi terror. A world famous example is Anne Frank's diary. By far the majority of so-called war diaries were published by survivors, their descendants, or editors sooner or later after the war.<sup>6</sup> First, though, let us consider the diaries and letters more generally.

### 1.1. *The Two Diaries*

As previously mentioned, I find it unlikely that Philip Mechanicus would ever have published his diary in its present form. In support of this assertion, we have to look at Mechanicus' method of working and his earlier publications.

First, a comment about the articles by Mechanicus. During the 1930s, the author became well-known for his reports from Russia and Palestine. He made five journeys: four to Russia<sup>7</sup> and one to Palestine.<sup>8</sup> The reports, which were first published in the Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*, were so popular that a selection of them was subsequently published in book form.<sup>9</sup> We know that on his journeys to Russia he took extensive notes, which he developed into a series of newspaper articles that appeared during his travels and after his return

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dirk Mulder in his introduction to: Philip Mechanicus, *In Dépôt*, 10–11.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the better known authors are: Abel J. Herzberg, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel. The widely known diary by the Dutch writer Renata Laqueur was not published until 1965 by herself. Cf. Sandra Ziegler, *Gedächtnis und Identität der KZ-Erfahrung: Niederländische und deutsche Augenzeugenberichte des Holocaust* (Würzburg: Köningshausen & Neumann, 2006). Ziegler dedicates chapter 4 to Etty Hillesum (215–275) and chapter 5 to Philip Mechanicus (277–318). A study that I was not able to consult before closing this article, is: Bettine Siertsema, *Uit de diepten: Nederlandse egodocumenten over de nazi concentratiekampen* (Vught: Skandalon, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Russia: 1929, 1931, 1932, and 1934. Because of the critical comments in his articles, the Soviet authorities refused to grant him a visa for his planned fifth visit to Russia.

<sup>8</sup> Palestine: 1933.

<sup>9</sup> In 1932, the newspaper published a selection of articles in a brochure entitled: *Russische Reisschetsen*. They were re-printed in 1932 by the Amsterdam publisher Andries Blitz under the title *Van sikkel en hamer*. The articles following his journey to Palestine were re-printed by his newspaper in: *Een volk bouwt zijn huis: Palestijnse reisschetsen* (Amsterdam: Algemeen Handelsblad, 1933).

to the Netherlands. His articles on Palestine were written partly during his travels. Unfortunately, we do not have the notes on which his reports are based. We do know, however, that extensive note taking was Philip Mechanicus' method of working.<sup>10</sup> Mechanicus wrote his diaries in a number of exercise books, filled with what are clearly notes intended to be developed later and turned into an easily readable text. If one compares the articles with the diary notes, one is immediately struck by the enormous wealth of facts in both texts; however, the extremely concise character is prominent in the diary texts, indicating material that was to be expanded upon later.

The same provisional status applies in a certain sense to the diaries by Etty Hillesum, although the general feature of the text is not concise at all. However, she herself indicated that she wanted to collect raw material—material she could draw on later in her writing.

There is a notable difference between the two diaries in their present printed form. While Etty Hillesum's diary was published in an exemplary manner, respectful of the author and her text, the same cannot be said for Philip Mechanicus' diary. In addition, for reasons of privacy, the text of Mechanicus' diary was not published in its entirety. Readers and researchers must therefore be cautious. I believe that both texts should be ascribed the status of 'raw material' and that any judgements about their content should be formulated with reservation.

The simple fact—and this is the second point—that both authors wrote, does not mean that they would have wished their texts to be published in their present form.

### 1.2. *The Letters*

Etty Hillesum wrote more than forty letters from Camp Westerbork.<sup>11</sup> Two long letters were devoted to the camp itself. The first of these she wrote in December 1942 in her room in Gabriel Metsustraat, in Amsterdam. It is addressed to "two sisters" in The Hague.<sup>12</sup> She wrote her second letter about the camp on 24 August 1943, when she had already spent several months in the camp. It is addressed to Pa Han and her other friends in the Gabriel Metsustraat. A period of eight

<sup>10</sup> Koert Broersma, *'Buigen onder de storm': Levensschets van Philip Mechanicus 1889–1944* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1992), 56–57.

<sup>11</sup> The camp is mentioned to a greater or lesser extent in these letters.

<sup>12</sup> Thus far, it has remained impossible to identify these two sisters.

months separates the two letters. The first letter was written in the calm of a study, the second during the hours shortly after the departure of a transport on which 1020 Jews were deported to the East and their death.<sup>13</sup> The writing of the two letters is separated by a long time span during which she met an important person: the renowned journalist Philip Mechanicus.

She refers to Mechanicus in the second part of the second letter but does not name him.<sup>14</sup> We read how she observes the loading of the train in his company (and that of several children) from behind a window of one of the barracks opposite the *Boulevard des Misères*.<sup>15</sup> It is the cynical voice of Mechanicus that says: "One always gets a wonderful view from here of the arriving and departing transports."<sup>16</sup> In his diary notes of 24 August 1943, Mechanicus, too, wrote extensively about this transport,<sup>17</sup> but he does not mention Etty Hillesum. The assumption that they were in the same room, is supported by the fact that they both quote a third person, who says: "The previous commandant used to kick Jews to Poland, this one laughs them to Poland."<sup>18</sup> The sentence written by Etty Hillesum hardly differs: "We used to have a commandant who kicked the people to Poland, this one laughs them to Poland."<sup>19</sup>

Of the letters and postcards that Philip Mechanicus sent from Camp Westerbork to a few relatives and friends, fifty are known.<sup>20</sup> The correspondence was addressed to his daughter Ruth and her mother, to his former wife Annie Jonkman, and to Jo Heinsius in Nijmegen, in whose house his two other daughters were in hiding. Mechanicus refers to the camp at length in his letters, but particularly in connection with his personal circumstances. In his diary, the theme is the camp

<sup>13</sup> Shortly after Etty Hillesum and her family (but without Jaap) were "quite unexpectedly" placed on transport on 7 September 1943, both letters were published anonymously in the autumn of that same year.

<sup>14</sup> This was for security reasons. Mechanicus, too, in his diary identifies only public figures with forename and surname.

<sup>15</sup> It was the name given to the road that ran through the middle of the camp. The railway line for all the arriving and departing transports ran alongside it.

<sup>16</sup> E.T., 650. *Etty*, 693: Het is hier altijd een riant uitzicht op de in- en uitgaande transporten geweest.

<sup>17</sup> Mechanicus, *In Dépôt*, 135–138.

<sup>18</sup> Mechanicus, *In Dépôt*, 138.

<sup>19</sup> E.T., 653. *Etty*, 696: We hadden vroeger een commandant, die trapte de mensen naar Polen, deze lacht ze naar Polen.

<sup>20</sup> Partly published in: Mechanicus, *'Ik woon zoals je weet, drie hoog'*. The unpublished letters are in the archives of the Westerbork Memorial Centre.

itself. His personal circumstances are not prominent in this important document.

## 2. *The Authors*<sup>21</sup>

What strikes one immediately is the significant age difference between the authors: a little over 25 years. We are quickly reminded of Etty Hillesum's preference for associating with people much older than herself.<sup>22</sup> Anyone who compares the brief outline of Mechanicus' life with the biography of Hillesum, will discover that there are also enormous differences in their social origins, even though not a trace of this can be found in either of their writings. Also, differences in the level of their life experiences and careers could not be greater. Their individual social positions before their internment must also have determined their positions in the camp. With regard to their outlook on life, Philip Mechanicus tended toward a socio-economic and politically and historically oriented world view, while Etty Hillesum veered towards spirituality, psychology and religion. In essence, her view was directed above all towards the spiritual being. Poetry and literature were considerably more important to Hillesum than to Mechanicus.

It goes without saying that the well-travelled journalist Mechanicus was an exceptionally attractive discussion partner for Etty Hillesum. They not only shared a great interest in literature, but both of them knew Russian and harboured a great love for that country and its culture. They also had something else in common: both were avid readers.

I will now provide a brief outline of Mechanicus' life.

### 2.1. *Philip Mechanicus*<sup>23</sup>

Mechanicus became known in particular as the writer of *In Dépôt: Dagboek uit Westerbork*, which was first published in the Netherlands in 1964

<sup>21</sup> Biographical information about Etty Hillesum can be found in the Short Biography, also in this volume.

<sup>22</sup> To name just two examples: Julius Spier and Han Wegerif.

<sup>23</sup> For the details about Mechanicus, I made grateful use of Broersma, *Buigen onder de storm*. I wish to thank Mr. Guido Abuys, staff member at the *Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork*, who was of great help to me consulting the documents on Philip Mechanicus contained in their archives.

with an introduction by J. Presser.<sup>24</sup> Its publication came about only after the historians Presser and De Jong had managed to persuade Annie Jonkman of its importance.

Philip Mechanicus' parents married in Amsterdam on 8 November 1888. Sarah was then already three months pregnant with her first son Philip, who was born on 17 April 1889. Philip was the first of eight sons, three of whom were to die not long after their birth or in early childhood. Sarah and Elias Mechanicus and their children lived at no fewer than five different addresses in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam; in 1902, they found a permanent home in Lange Houtstraat. Officially, Elias was a tailor by profession, but in reality, he was a rag-and-bone man. The household income was very low and the family belonged to the very lowest strata of Amsterdam's population. Elias' alcoholism drove the couple apart; in 1902 they split up, although their separation was never made official. The relationship between father and sons was not good: they reproached him for having neglected his family.

Philip Mechanicus attended school only until he was twelve, but his love of learning and his talents made an impression on his teachers. Through the intervention of the school principal, when Philip Mechanicus reached the age at which he had to contribute to the household income, he went to work at the socialist newspaper *Het Volk* ('The People'), established on 2 April 1900. He was given a job in the dispatch department. At the newspaper, it was soon recognized, however, that Mechanicus had more to offer than was demanded of him as a messenger boy. He was encouraged to study and, being tenacious by nature, managed through the years to rise to an administrative position at the party newspaper.

In 1902, Mechanicus joined the socialist youth movement *De Zaaier* ('The Sower'),<sup>25</sup> entering an environment where concern for the upbringing and education of young people was given high priority. Besides (free) education by socialist teachers, Mechanicus also received training and political education from the organization through meetings, the study of (political) tracts and pamphlets, and through excursions.

<sup>24</sup> An English translation appeared in 1984 and a German translation in 1993. See note 3.

<sup>25</sup> The youth organisation *De Zaaier* was founded in 1901 and was associated with the SDAP, see following note. Subsequently, *De Zaaier* became the youth organisation of the CPN, the Dutch Communist Party. A very detailed study of the Dutch youth organisations is Ger Harmsen, *Blauwe en rode jeugd: Ontstaan, ontwikkeling en teruggang van de Nederlandse jeugdbeweging tussen 1853 en 1940* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1961).

Philip Mechanicus threw himself into this new world with great enthusiasm. In this environment, the Dutch East Indies were regarded as an ideal destination because it was believed that the opportunities for self-development were considerably greater there than in the Netherlands. Mechanicus also attended evening classes during this period and applied himself in particular to foreign languages. In 1906, the newspaper appointed him as proofreader and later he became the youngest journalist in the editorial department of *Het Volk*. He was seventeen.

In the summer of 1910, Philip Mechanicus signed a six-year contract as copyeditor for the Dutch East Indian newspaper, the *Sumatra-Post*. This commitment was the result of a number of events in Philip Mechanicus' life. On 24 September 1909 he was called up for national service in the Army, in the Infantry. Mechanicus considered ways of escaping this "forced internment." A few of his friends from the youth movement had already left for the Dutch East Indies. Also, Philip Mechanicus had discovered that anyone wanting to go to the colonies could count on flexibility on the part of the authorities, and his request to leave the army in order to settle in the Dutch East Indies was greeted with a positive reaction.

Before his departure, Esther Wessel and Philip Mechanicus announced their engagement. They had become acquainted in 1908 during one of the SDAP evening courses.<sup>26</sup> Her father was a diamond worker and the family could therefore count on a good income. Esther was the eldest of six Wessel children—four other daughters and one son. She was one and a half years older than her future husband. They married by proxy on 21 June 1913. Several months later, she departed for the Dutch East Indies to join her husband. Philip Mechanicus had built a good reputation as a journalist and after his contract ended with the *Sumatra-Post*, he accepted an offer from the Semarang newspaper, *De Locomotief*, to become its deputy chief editor. He published articles about East Asia, Dutch East Indies politics, and closely followed the Russian Revolution of 1917.

In spring 1919, Philip Mechanicus decided to end his journalistic career in the Dutch East Indies and to return to the Netherlands upon completion of his contract at the end of 1919. Esther decided

<sup>26</sup> During the first decade of the twentieth century, the *Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij* ('Social Democratic Workers' Party') was a rapidly growing labour party with a flourishing social life.



to travel back earlier: on 19 August 1919 she embarked for Amsterdam. Their marriage had been under great strain since the second half of 1918. In the spring of 1924, they decided to separate and on 20 November, their marriage was dissolved.

Philip Mechanicus' journalistic career at the *Algemeen Handelsblad* began officially on 15 August 1920: he was appointed foreign editor. In this position, he was able to follow his great love, international news, for almost 21 years. We will briefly summarize this long and successful career. Although in the early years Mechanicus travelled abroad a few times, for the most part he worked out of his editorial office. He did not become known to the public at large until his journeys to the Soviet Union and Palestine. Altogether, he was to make four journeys to Russia: in 1929, 1931, 1932, and 1934, and one to Palestine in 1933. He travelled through Russia in the company of others because the journeys were always organized and controlled by the authorities. In Palestine, he enjoyed the liberty of travelling alone through the country, assisted only by an interpreter and a chauffeur.

Mechanicus wrote his reports both during the journey and after his return as well, based on his notes and his memory. The articles from Russia were so well received by the readers that the newspaper decided to republish a selection of them in a collected edition. The first collection appeared in March 1932: *Russische Reisschetsen* ('Russian travel sketches'), and contained reports from his first and second journeys. His articles on Palestine were published in a collected edition in October 1933 under the title: *Een volk bouwt zijn huis* ('A nation builds its house'), very shortly after his journey.<sup>27</sup>

On 1 September 1936, Philip Mechanicus was appointed chief foreign editor and in this capacity wrote daily political commentaries. The developments in Germany drew his main attention. He travelled abroad several times in those years: he visited Saarbrücken in 1934, Prague in July 1938, the Dolomites in 1938, and at the end of August 1939 he went on holiday to Switzerland.

On 10 May 1940, the Netherlands were occupied, and from that day on Philip Mechanicus no longer appeared in the editorial offices. He continued to contribute articles a while longer, publishing under a

<sup>27</sup> Mechanicus had an illustrious predecessor who published in the *Algemeen Handelsblad*: between 1919 and 1924 Jacob Israel de Haan wrote almost four hundred (393) travel letters from Palestine. The newspaper had appointed De Haan as correspondent on a fixed annual salary.

pseudonym, but he no longer wrote about foreign politics. On 15 July 1941, Philip Mechanicus was dismissed from the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, as were all Jewish employees—a measure forced on the newspaper by the German occupier.

Philip Mechanicus was arrested at the end of September 1942, not by the Germans but by a Dutch policeman on the Stadhouderskade in Amsterdam. According to another version, he was arrested on the tram after someone recognized and betrayed him, for Mechanicus was in the habit of appearing on the streets without displaying a yellow star on his clothing.<sup>28</sup> After a short detention in an Amsterdam police station, he was transferred to the prison in Scheveningen; one month later, he was locked up in Camp Amersfoort. On 7 November 1942, badly knocked about from having been tortured, he was interned in Camp Westerbork and on 8 March 1944, he was deported from there to Camp Bergen-Belsen in Germany. Almost nothing is known about his stay in this camp. On 9 October 1944, Philip Mechanicus was deported to Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau where he arrived on 12 October. About three days later, he was shot dead in the execution chamber of Crematorium II together with the rest of the group of 120 with whom he had arrived. This information was supplied by Mr. Jacob Jessurun Pinto and Mr. Izaak Korn; it is contained in the declarations that they made in November 1945 before members of the *Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie* ('Netherlands Institute for War Documentation') in Amsterdam.

### 3. *The Two Authors in the Camp*

Despite great differences, both authors enjoyed a privileged social position in the camp.

Etty Hillesum's task in the camp was to help the deportees, under orders from the *Joodsche Raad* ('Jewish Council'), which had an office in Camp Westerbork. The exact nature of her task is made clear in the first part of her letter about the transport of 24 August 1943. A large number of the inhabitants of the barracks that had been assigned to her were on the transport list. Hillesum was expected to offer concrete help with packing and possibly hand out extra clothes for the journey.

<sup>28</sup> The German occupier had decreed that from 3 May 1942 all Jews in the Netherlands had to display the yellow six pointed Star of David on their clothing.

She also offered moral support wherever necessary, but we do not know whether she had been assigned this task, or simply took it upon herself. It goes without saying that for as long as the Jewish Council wanted her to carry out the work, she was protected from transport. She lost her status of co-worker on 5 July 1943 and thereby joined the *transportfähig* category—eligible for transport.

Mechanicus was highly regarded in the camp by those who knew of his former work as a journalist, yet he never held an official function. In view of his personal history, it seems unlikely that he would have accepted such a position. However, for a while he did belong to a so-called commission charged with reducing the friction that existed between German and Dutch Jews. The commission bore little fruit, except as a means of protecting oneself from—or at least postponing—departure via transport.

#### 4. *The Transport of 24 August 1943*

The actual events around the transport of Tuesday 24 August 1943 can be summarized as follows. It was a punishment transport on which one thousand and twenty Jews were to depart.<sup>29</sup> The names were announced the evening before, as was customary. This particular transport was marked by the escape attempt of three people on the transport list, two of whom were quickly tracked down and hauled in. One of them was arrested in the nearby village of Beilen, and the other in the camp itself. The escape attempt led to a punishment measure: the commandant decided that fifty extra people were to go on transport.

Apart from the three hundred or so *S-Fälle*,<sup>30</sup> many elderly and numerous sick men and women were brought to the train on stretchers

<sup>29</sup> According to De Jong, it was the 37th transport to Auschwitz, but according to Lindwer's list, it was the 51st. This 24 August 1943 transport was the 70th since the first convoy left Camp Westerbork on 15 July 1942. Fifty-one convoys left for Auschwitz, nineteen for Sobibor. Cf. Lou de Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog: Deel 8, Gevangenen en gedeporteerden* ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 8, II, 758, and Lindwer, *Kamp van hoop en wanhoop*, 256. De Jong quotes almost the whole of Ety Hillesum's letter, which he considers to be of a "unique power and purity."

<sup>30</sup> They were internees who had been arrested because, for example, they had been in hiding, or had omitted to display the Star of David, or had committed other 'misdeeds.' Subject transport was called the punishment transport because about 300 prisoners went on it. Mechanicus gives some details in his dairy entry of 20 August

and loaded into the cattle trucks. The *Ordedienst*, the OD,<sup>31</sup> under the command of Pisk<sup>32</sup> was responsible for loading the train. The loading of the train was also attended by Dr. Spanier,<sup>33</sup> members of the *Grüne Polizei*,<sup>34</sup> *Obersturmführer*<sup>35</sup> Gemmeker, his adjutant Heinz Todtmann,<sup>36</sup> and Kurt Schlesinger. When everyone had been loaded, the doors were closed and bolted on the outside. The above named camp authorities arrived during the course of the morning and all were present when the train departed. The transport train departed at 11.00 a.m., as did almost all Tuesday trains from Camp Westerbork. The word 'transport' in the texts of our authors refers to a complex aggregate of events in which the entire camp is painfully involved.

##### 5. *The Two Texts about the Events of 24 August 1943*

The diary note by Mechanicus about the transport of 24 August 1943 is a little less than one third the length of Etty Hillesum's letter. This

1943: four hundred *S-Fälle* and three hundred sick old people, with their families and all tuberculosis patients. Cf. Mechanicus, *In Dépôt*, 131.

<sup>31</sup> The 'Ordedienst' (OD), the camp service corps in Westerbork, constituted 'Dienststelle III.' It was apparently composed in March 1942 when the camp was still under the Dutch commander, Jac. Schol. At that time, a kind of camp police maintained order. In April 1943, the OD consisted of 182 Dutch and German Jews, but by February 1944 their numbers had declined to 67. Their brutal treatment of their Jewish fellow prisoners equalled that of the German *Grüne Polizei*. Some of them even betrayed other Jews. Philip Mechanicus describes the OD in his diary as the Jewish SS. One of the tasks of the OD in Camp Westerbork was to make sure that the appropriate people with their luggage were ready to depart on a transport train. Members of the OD, clothed in green overalls, escorted ill and old people onto the train. They blocked off approaches to the train and formed a cordon around the platform. (The OD was held personally responsible by the Germans if anyone escaped.) The OD in Camp Westerbork was also used on several occasions for roundups in the country, for example when the psychiatric clinic *Het Apeldoornsche Bosch* was emptied, and also when the large roundups were held in Amsterdam on 20 and 21 June 1943. [cf. the note in E.T., 650].

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Pisk, head of the OD and the 'Fliegende Kolonne.' Pisk was from Austria.

<sup>33</sup> Dr. Fritz Spanier, head of the medical service and director of the hospital. Spanier and Gemmeker were both from Düsseldorf (Germany) and were acquainted.

<sup>34</sup> The *Grüne Polizei* ('Green Police') were a special German police force who were called out when large-scale forces were required, e.g., for the suppression of riots or for roundups. They were also used to guard transport trains and carry out executions. Their name came from the green colour of their uniforms. [cf. the note in E.T., 601]

<sup>35</sup> Comparable to the U.S. Army rank of Lieutenant colonel.

<sup>36</sup> Heinz Todtmann, German Jew, journalist.

is explained by two factors. First, the notes in Mechanicus' diary are all very brief, and secondly Etty Hillesum devoted the first three fifths of her letter to her tour of the barracks, which as an employee of the Jewish Council was under her control.

Although Mechanicus' notes are brief, they are nonetheless systematically organized: their tone is unmistakably cynical, his choice of words quite negative. The writer could have easily turned them into an article or eventually into a book.

Hillesum wrote her text in the form of a letter. It directly addresses people (Han Wegerif and others), has a clear beginning and is written in the first person. Her letter is fairly long and Hillesum therefore returns occasionally to her addressees to avoid losing contact with them.

In the following two paragraphs, I will first discuss the text by Mechanicus and then the text by Hillesum.

#### 5.1. *The Text of 24 August 1943 by Mechanicus*

Mechanicus uses the metaphor of film as the structuring principle for his diary entry. Mechanicus was knowledgeable of this then relatively modern medium. A passage from an article written in 1932 about stage and film in Russia<sup>37</sup> provides evidence that he had been following cinematography for a number of years. In this article, the journalist appears well informed about the fortunes of the Russian film industry. He describes the Russian filmmakers as "unrivalled masters," and when we think of Eisenstein this assessment certainly does not seem an exaggeration.<sup>38</sup> Mechanicus underlines the connection between politics and film, and points out that the Bolsheviki were embarrassed by the long queues outside the cinemas where "entertaining American and sentimental German" films were being shown.<sup>39</sup>

The journalist uses the word 'film' a number of times in the diary. On 15 July, when he was still residing in the camp hospital,<sup>40</sup> he uses the words 'film director' to describe his position as observer. Elsewhere

<sup>37</sup> Mechanicus, *Van sikkel en hamer*, 96–98.

<sup>38</sup> The Russian film school of the 1920s was highly regarded and Eisenstein's montage techniques were copied throughout the world.

<sup>39</sup> Mechanicus, *Van sikkel en hamer*, 96.

<sup>40</sup> Mechanicus spent almost eight months in the sick barracks. That was an exceptionally long time and is evidence that he enjoyed powerful protection during this period.

he offers this comparison: "The atmosphere in Westerbork is like that of a film town: artificial, synthetic."<sup>41</sup> And on 27 September 1943, a little over a month after the transport of 24 August, he looks back on his time in Camp Westerbork and as he takes stock, uses the same metaphor: "Nevertheless, time passed as in a film, as in a horrific, but captivating film. That is fact, now that it is all over. I did not see the film as a spectator sitting in a comfortable armchair, but as a member of the cast who had to grin and bear it while performing his role."<sup>42</sup> Here he places himself in the uncomfortable position of actor, not of privileged director.

It might be appropriate, at this point, to mention the so-called Westerbork film. During March, April, and May 1944, Rudolf Breslauer<sup>43</sup> shot a film in Camp Westerbork on the orders of commandant Gemmeke.<sup>44</sup> The commandant wanted a film that would depict life in the camp to the outside world. The filmmakers never completed the film. After the war, a version was put together from the rediscovered 'footage.'

As far as I know, no document exists indicating that Mechanicus knew about this film. On Wednesday 15 April 1944, he departed on a small transport to Camp Bergen-Belsen. In the diary, which ends with the entry of Monday 28 February 1944, there is also no reference to preparations for this film. Nevertheless, it seems to me unlikely that he would not have known about this project. It is impossible to know for sure, because the diary pages after 28 February 1944 are missing.

Mechanicus' use of the film metaphor helps the reader form an image of the events on that day. He also provides the reader with a sense of sequence by ascribing filmmaking terms such as *the short* and *feature film*, *the actors* and *the public* to his descriptions. In describing

<sup>41</sup> Mechanicus, *In Dépôt*, 105: De sfeer van Westerbork is die van een filmstad: kunstmatig, surrogaat.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 171: En toch is de tijd als een film, als een afgrijselijke, maar boeiende film, voorbijgegaan. Dat is zo, nu alles eenmaal achter de rug is. Ik heb de film niet gezien als toeschouwer in een gemakkelijke fauteuil, maar als medespeler, die bij het spelen van zijn rol op zijn tanden moest bijten.

<sup>43</sup> Rudolf Werner Breslauer (München 1904–Auschwitz 1944), German photographer and filmmaker.

<sup>44</sup> Broersma and Rossing carried out an investigation into this film, see: Koert Broersma & Gerard Rossing, *Kamp Westerbork gefilmd: Het verhaal over een unieke film uit 1944* (Hooghalen: Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, 1997). Boas quotes liberally from the script of the film. Cf. Jacob Boas, *Boulevard des Misères: Het verhaal van doorgangskamp Westerbork* (Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1988).

the flight of the three men, one from the hospital and two from the S-barracks,<sup>45</sup> he uses the words ‘exciting prelude.’ He describes the hunt that the OD set in motion for the three escapees and the consequence of their action.

He then announces the ‘feature film’ with the comment that because of the prelude, the public is “already seething with indignation.” The loading of the people into the goods wagons is the “true film,” and he characterizes this event with the chilly words: “The well-known procedure with a few variations.” Then, when the transport has departed at the prescribed time: “the silent film has ended. [...] The public goes its way, silently, incapable of realizing what it has witnessed.”

These two terms: ‘short film’ and ‘feature film’ refer to two shocking events: the hunt by the OD for the three Jews who had escaped, and the spectacle observed on many previous occasions of cattle trucks being loaded with terrified Jews. This completes the structural aspects of the description by Mechanicus.

Mechanicus certainly wastes no words of praise on the actors or on the public. First, we will consider the way in which he describes the former. The *Grüne Polizei*: “underdeveloped piggy eyed heads of country bumpkins, completely indifferent, numbed...”; the members of the *Ordedienst* (OD) “perform the dirty work for the *Grüne Polizei*; in an unbroken stream they carry the stretchers bearing broken human beings whom they smartly hoist into the cattle trucks”; everything “under the direction of Pisk, the head of the OD, but having the appearance of a kind of pirate”; Gemmeker<sup>46</sup> appears next, is greeted by the commandant of the *Grünen*, a “fat, overfed bruiser”; then Gemmeker speaks “to his pale adjutant Todtmann, with his turned-up nose and worn out breeches,” a man with a hard face without a trace of emotion; then—when the train is almost filled—Kurt Schlesinger<sup>47</sup> appears, “as hero, as lion tamer”; he joins *Obersturmführer* Gemmeker, in an unaffected, natural manner. Then, when the doors have been

<sup>45</sup> De *Strafbarak* (‘punishment barracks’) was a special barracks where so-called prisoners (*S-Fälle*) were interned as they waited to be deported.

<sup>46</sup> Albrecht Konrad Gemmeker (1908–1982). The book by Nanda van der Zee about Camp Westerbork is in fact above all about commandant Gemmeker. Nanda van der Zee, *Westerbork: Het doorgangskamp en zijn commandant* (Soesterberg: Uitgeverij Aspect, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Kurt Schlesinger, who Gemmeker had made Chief Service Leader from 12 August 1943, that is to say that he stood at the head of the twelve services and their service leaders in the camp.

hermetically closed and the train begins to leave the camp, again the metaphor: "The silent film has ended."<sup>48</sup> This ends the extremely cynical description of the perpetrators, split into two categories: the Nazis and their Jewish accomplices.

In concluding this description, Mechanicus passes judgement on the spectators: "The public proceeds on its way, silently, incapable of realizing what it has witnessed."<sup>49</sup> At first, this verdict is difficult to interpret: why should the camp inhabitants be unable to fathom the meaning of what they have witnessed? A possible answer can be found in Mechanicus' earlier observations. He reproaches the public for having appeared indignant over the attempted escape by the three men, which resulted in fifty extra Jews having to go on transport. Mechanicus writes: "The spiritual degeneration of many has progressed to such an extent that they abreact their indignation not on the tyrant, but on those who attempt to escape from their clutches."<sup>50</sup> What Mechanicus calls "spiritual degeneration" is, in my opinion, nothing more than the logical continuation of a strategy for self-preservation. After all, the public's perception was that escape attempts endangered their consolidated position in the camp. In my opinion, Mechanicus links the escape episode to a strong argument justifying his reproach of "spiritual degeneration:" the fact remains that those who were put on transport earlier as punishment would ultimately have gone all the same. They merely went sooner. Mechanicus admits, however: "The sudden punishment transport is a bitter blow for these men."<sup>51</sup>

The second point concerns his belief about escape. Mechanicus establishes an essential principal: "a prisoner retains the right to flee, even though the tyrant threatens reprisals against those who do not

<sup>48</sup> Mechanicus, *In Dépôt*, 136–138: [...] ongevormde koppen van boerenpummels met varkensoogjes: volkomen onverschillig, afgestompt [...] doen het handlangerswerk voor de Grüne Polizei: zij dragen in onafgebroken stroom de draagbaren met gebroken, half-vergane mensen, die zij technisch-knap in de beestenwagens hijsen. [...] onder leiding van Pisk, het hoofd van de OD, naar het uiterlijk een soort [...] zeeschuimer. [...] een dikke, vette volgevreten kerel [...] zijn bleke adjudant Todtmann met zijn wipneus en zijn verschoten rijbroek. [...] als heldenfiguur, als leeuwentemmer [...] De zwijgende film is afgelopen.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, 138: Het publiek gaat zijns weegs, sprakeloos, niet bij machte te realiseren wat het heeft gezien.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, 136: Zover is hier de geestelijke ontaarding van velen gevorderd, dat zij hun verontwaardiging niet afreageren op de beul en zijn knechten, maar op degenen, die pogen zich aan hun handen te onttrekken.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, 136: Voor deze mannen is het plotselinge straftransport een harde slag.



flee...<sup>52</sup> Mechanicus had considered escaping on a number of occasions. On 4 September, less than two weeks after this event, he writes: "Shall I flee and go into hiding, or participate in the Great Trek, join the main stream? I will have to give it some more thought..."<sup>53</sup> Ten days later (14 September 1943) he writes again on this theme, revealing that he even had detailed plans to escape. Apparently, he regarded the chance of being caught rather great, along with the possibility of prolonging his stay in Camp Westerbork. Hence his decision not to attempt escape.

### 5.2. *The Text of 24 August 1943 by Etty Hillesum*<sup>54</sup>

Hillesum describes the same transport but moulds her text in the classic form of a two-part letter. In the first part, she gives a detailed description of her visit to the inhabitants of the barracks to whom she was required to lend assistance, while in the second part, she describes the loading of the goods wagons.

The letter is arranged chronologically. On the evening before the departure of the train, Hillesum takes a walk through the camp accompanied by Philip Mechanicus (a). During the night, she assists the deportees (b) and in the morning she remains in the barracks from where she watches the loading of the train (c). Observe the efficient three-part time-place scheme into which she has arranged the facts. The letter also has a short introduction and a conclusion.

I will now discuss the letter based on several central themes.

The first part of the letter is a breathtaking description of her tour through what she terms "my sick barracks." The use of the word 'my' indicates that Hillesum felt an intimate link with the (departing) occupants of this barracks. The multiple use of diminutives also points to her emotional involvement. In the ten instances that she discusses in her letter, she uses words that mean little girl, little face, little mother, little women, little woman of the people, little well-heeled woman.

What do the ten cases that she describes have in common? Nearly all the women and girls give expression to feelings of extreme fear and

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, 136: Een gevangene behoudt het recht op de vlucht, ook al dreigt de beul met repressailles op hen die niet vluchten [...].

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, 149: Zal ik de vlucht nemen en onder water gaan, of de grote trek meemaken, meegaan met de grote stroom? Daar moet ik nog een over nadenken.

<sup>54</sup> E.T., 644-654; *Etty*, 686-698.

despair, which in the fourth case leads to the ultimate deed: the suicide of the mother of a female colleague of Etty Hillesum. Many cases involve mothers with babies and young children. Despair is intensified by fear and concern for the fate of the child.

One woman alone displays behavior that does not betray despair and fear: "She appears ready and eager to leave, and is beautifully turned out," writes Hillesum, who quotes her words: "I'm embarking on a wonderful journey; I might find my husband."

The despair and fear that afflict these deportees are prompted by the threatening fate—a fate about which nothing is known but from which the worst is expected—and borne by the residents of a sick barracks. We know that those who resided in the sick barracks of Camp Westerbork believed themselves to be relatively safe. Consequently, being placed on a transport list struck them that much harder. Moreover, these were people who were genuinely sick, or who had to care for a sick child, or who were pregnant—circumstances in which they believed themselves to be *gesperrt*.<sup>55</sup>

It is their intense sadness and spiritual desperation that Hillesum conveys to the readers of her letter.

#### 5.2.1. *The Terms "Disaster" and "Helping"*

At the beginning of the letter, Hillesum recounts her walk through the camp with Mechanicus; in his diary notes, Mechanicus refers to the same event. The journalist draws Hillesum's attention to the groups of people standing together as if they were discussing the results of a disaster. Hillesum's sharp mind leaps up: "But that is precisely what's so incomprehensible, it is now before the disaster."<sup>56</sup> In the discussion that Hillesum subsequently develops, she associates the terms 'disaster' with the term 'helping.' The usual connotation of helping is positive: the offered help leads to improvement of the social-psychological condition of the person who is helped. Hillesum detects a contradiction:

Tonight I shall be there to dress all babies and to calm mothers—and that is what I call "helping." I could almost curse myself for that. For we all know that we are yielding up our sick and defenceless brother and

<sup>55</sup> Exempted from deportation until further orders.

<sup>56</sup> E.T., 645. *Etty*, 688: "Maar dat is juist het onbegrijpelijke" barstte ik uit, "het is nu vóór de ramp."

sister to hunger, heat, cold, exposure, and destruction, and yet we dress them and escort them to the bare cattle cars—and if they can't walk, we carry them on stretchers.<sup>57</sup>

In this passage, Etty Hillesum points out that the word 'helping' has the opposite meaning. She relates the deceptive character of this 'helping' to herself initially, but it is evident that this way of doing things concerns others, too—all those who contribute to the perfect functioning of the deportation machinery, from the employees of the Jewish Council right up to the members of the OD.

Officially, Etty Hillesum sticks to the task assigned to her by the Jewish Council. After all, her job description stated: "to offer assistance to the deportees." She becomes aware of the far-reaching and largely unforeseen consequences of this assistance only as the frequency of the transports increases and especially as those who are sick and quite unfit for work are deported. From this perspective, it is understandable how the meaning of the words 'helping' and 'destruction' could approach each other and even threaten to overlap in Hillesum's mind. It was an absurd, disturbing entwining which robbed the concept of 'helping' under normal circumstances of its positive values and meaning. Ultimately, Etty Hillesum became fully aware that assisting and helping served the self-preservation of the helper, and landed those who were being helped in a life threatening situation. Hillesum experienced this situation as "puzzling," and felt it brought her face to face with insoluble, "deeper questions."

What Hillesum experiences as a nearly unbridgeable dilemma, Mechanicus experiences as no problem at all. This becomes clear when we try to lay bare the paradoxical character of 'helping.' For Mechanicus and for many others in Camp Westerbork, this kind of conduct was one of many strategies prisoners used to remain in the camp for as long as possible. It was, therefore, a strategy for self-preservation. The longer one could remain in Camp Westerbork, the greater the chance of survival. After all, the war had to end sometime. If one could make oneself useful in the camp, the chance of prolonging

<sup>57</sup> E.T., 645 [translation revised]. *Etty*, 688: Maar ik ga vannacht alle babies aankleden en moeders kalmerend toespreken en dat noem ik dan "helpen", ik zou me hier bijna om kunnen vervloeken, we weten toch, dat we onze zieken en weerlozen gaan prijsgeven aan honger, aan hitte en kou en onbeschuttheid en verdelging en we kleden ze zelf aan en geleiden ze naar de kale beestenwagens, als ze niet kunnen lopen, dan maar op brancards.

one's stay increased. For example, being involved in some way with the organization of the camp: the Administration, the Camp Police, the Revue or other jobs that had the appearance of being indispensable. Also, hospitalization extended one's stay in the camp. Mechanicus' diary offers a large number of relevant details. However, I should point out that the theme of self-preservation was not a priority for Etty Hillesum. Her mother thought differently. In fact, she made various attempts to protect her family from joining a transport. On Wednesday 25 August 1943, the day after the transport that is the subject of both texts, she even approached Philip Mechanicus to ask him if he could intervene on her behalf. Apparently, Mechanicus spoke to Etty Hillesum about his meeting with her mother. Her words about her mother and father are revealing and Mechanicus reports them literally: "[...] I wish that I could go to Poland in their place if they had to go."<sup>58</sup>

### 5.2.2. *The Tyrant at Work*

In the second part of her letter, Hillesum reveals an important motive for writing this and other texts. She writes: "The outside world probably thinks of us as a grey, uniform, suffering mass of Jews, and knows nothing of the gulfs and abysses and subtle differences that exist between us. They could never hope to understand."<sup>59</sup> Hillesum seems to be particularly conscious of the limited ability of the written word to communicate adequately what has taken place before her eyes. She says as much at the beginning of this letter to her friends: "I have told you often enough that no words or images can adequately describe nights like these."<sup>60</sup> Yet, no one can deny that this letter is quite successful in adequately conveying the horrors of the terror and the suffering of the victims. Let us now see what Etty Hillesum wanted to tell us in the second part of her letter, and how she conveyed it.

She distinguishes between two categories of perpetrators: the Jews as 'accomplices' on one hand, and the Nazis: commandant Gemmeke

<sup>58</sup> Mechanicus, *In Dépôt*, 139–140: Ik wou dat ik in hun plaats naar Polen kon gaan, als zij moeten.

<sup>59</sup> E.T., 653. *Etty*, 697: De buitenwereld denkt misschien aan ons als een grauwe, gelijkvormige, lijdende massa van Joden, ze weet niets van de kloven en afgronden en de schakeringen die er zijn tussen de enkelingen en groepen, zij zal dat misschien niet eens kunnen begrijpen.

<sup>60</sup> E.T., 644. *Etty*, 687: Dat woorden en beelden niet toereikend zijn voor nachten als deze, heb ik jullie al vaak genoeg verteld.

and the *Grüne Polizei*, on the other. The accomplices consist of different groups: the OD and the *Fliegende Kolonne*<sup>61</sup> who are responsible for the practical loading of the goods trains. Two individuals are mentioned in detail: Gemmeker's Jewish secretary and "the *Oberdienstleiter* [...] a German Jew of massive build." Heinz Todtmann is "smartly dressed in fawn riding breeches and brown sports jacket. He has the sporty demeanour yet vacuous expression of the English whisky drinker." The second is Kurt Schlesinger, dressed in "black top boots, black cap, black army coat with yellow star. He has a cruel mouth and a powerful neck."<sup>62</sup>

The second category consists of the surveillance platoon of the *Grüne Polizei* and commandant Gemmeker, whose appearance and reality she describes: "This near-legendary figure is said to be quite charming and so well disposed towards the Jews." But hiding under the sheep's clothing is the wolf: "He is absolute master over life and death of Dutch and German Jews here on this remote heath in Drenthe Province." His face seems to her to be "a long, thin scar in which grimness mingles with joylessness and insincerity."<sup>63</sup>

Etty Hillesum, too, makes use of metaphor in her description of the commandant: in this case, the metaphor of theatre. Just like the world of cinematography, it is an illusionary world. Nevertheless, a deadly reality hides behind this appearance. She compares Gemmeker to a star from the revue—a comparison drawn from the fact that every Tuesday evening a theatre performance took place in the *Grote Zaal* ('Large Hall'). Cabaret and revue took turns.<sup>64</sup> Many camp internees

<sup>61</sup> Camp residents often referred to the *Fliegende Kolonne* ('Flying Column') by its initials, the FK. For some time, it was under the *Dienststelle* VI (outside service). It was always a small group: in 1942–43 it numbered about 120 men, after September 1943, this declined to 60, further reduced to 25, and in September 1944, it disappeared entirely. The most important task of the Flying Column was to transport luggage to the waiting transport trains. They had wheelbarrows for this. [cf. the note in E.T., 650]

<sup>62</sup> E.T., 653. *Etty*, 696–697: De "Oberdienstleiter" is een Duitse Jood met een machtige gestalte. [...] elegant gekleed in een beige rijbroek en een bruin sportjasje. Hij heeft het correcte, sportieve, doch nietszeggende uiterlijk van een Engelsen whisky-drinker. [...] Zwarte kaplaarzen, zwarte pet, zwart soldatenwambuis met gele ster. Hij heeft wrede lippen en een heersersnek.

<sup>63</sup> E.T., 653–654. *Etty*, 695–696: "Hij heeft zoveel charme en hij meent het zo goed met de Joden. [...] Hij is heer en meester over leven en dood van Hollandse en Duitse Joden op de Drentse hei. [...] een smal litteken, waarin verbeterheid, vreugdeloosheid en onoprechtheid, met elkaar vergroeid zijn."

<sup>64</sup> A booklet in the *Westerbork Cahiers* series mentioned earlier deals with the theatre in Westerbork camp. Cf. Dirk Mulder & Ben Prinsen, *Lachen in het donker: Amusement in kamp Westerbork* (Hooghalen: Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, 1996).

visited these performances regularly. The commandant was usually present. Others abhorred this form of entertainment, amongst them Hillesum and Mechanicus, who commented on it very negatively in their writings.

### 6. Conclusion

In formulating conclusions based on the analysis offered above of both texts, we must remind ourselves that neither Mechanicus nor Hillesum were able to see the final version of their text before it went to press. The text by Mechanicus in particular should be ascribed the status of 'notes.' Evidently, Hillesum did write her text for publication, as well as her letter of December 1942.

Hillesum and Mechanicus were together on the evening before and during the loading of the transport and observed the same events. The fact that the two texts nevertheless contain important differences in manner of observation and treatment of what each observed, can be explained by the writers' individual upbringing, life experiences, and history.

With the help of the concept of 'empathy,' we can formulate the differences more precisely. The discussions and observations described by Hillesum in the first part of her letter convey a generous capacity for feeling for and understanding others. She makes their fears and despair almost palpable, and although almost seventy years later, brings the reader particularly close to the deportees. The notes by Mechanicus are also based on observations and discussions (his two most important and systematically employed methods), but in the form that he ultimately gives the material (newspaper article, essay), he leaves little or no room for feelings of compassion. The careful reporting of the facts, alternating with reflections and comments, is the rule with him. For Mechanicus, observation demands that he maintain a respectable distance from the observed events. The concept of 'empathy' cannot be employed in the Mechanicus method.

The general conclusion is therefore: the text by Philip Mechanicus is indispensable for learning about the history of Camp Westerbork, as is the text by Etty Hillesum. Her text also reveals personal experiences of women and men enduring what is formally referred to as "the fate of the Jewish people," including our two authors: the woman Etty Hillesum and the man Philip Mechanicus.