

Dear Reader,

The winter of 2016 changed my life. That December I was fortunate to travel to Amsterdam, with no intention of starting on a new book project. I was simply happy to escape the news cycle and enjoy the holidays. But as soon as we arrived, a friend suggested we visit the Verzetsmuseum (Resistance Museum). “There’s a young woman you should write a book about,” she said.

I was skeptical.

“Her name was Hannie Schaft. She quit college to fight fascism and became the most wanted woman in Holland during World War II.”

Well, now I was intrigued. And, standing in front of the small glass display case, the rest of the world and its twenty-first-century troubles fell away. Inside were a pair of round, wire-rimmed glasses, a battered pistol, and a photograph of a young, auburn-haired woman in a skirt, blouse, and sensible shoes, with a defiant look on her face. This was Hannie Schaft.

Because she looked so mild and sweet, it was a shock to learn that Hannie and two other teenage girls, sisters Truus and Freddie Oversteegen, were among the very few women to take up arms in the Dutch Resistance; the gun on display was Hannie’s own. Between the three of them they were responsible for dozens of violent actions, including weapons transports, sabotage, and bombings. Hannie in particular was infamous for her assassinations of Nazi officials, and her reputation eventually spread all the way to Berlin, where Adolf Hitler ordered that “the Girl with Red Hair,” as she was known, be captured and killed. Somehow, in the midst of all this, Hannie also risked her life to shelter two of her best friends and fellow law students, Sonja and Philine, who were Jewish, in her own home.

I wanted to read Hannie’s biography but was surprised to discover that no such book in English existed. Even the books in Dutch were decades old. But I had to know more! My friend was right. As a trained historian, I had the skills to investigate Hannie’s life and times. There was no denying it now: In January 2017 I began this challenging new project.

As I began getting books translated and started research in the Dutch archives, I discovered a serious obstacle: There simply wasn’t much direct documentation of Hannie’s life—no diaries and very few letters existed. (One exception is a high school essay in which fifteen-year-old Hannie mocked the League of Nations for its failure to stop Mussolini’s genocidal invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. The fascist Italian dictator claimed to be bringing “civilization” to the Ethiopians, which, Hannie argued, was true if one meant “civilization in the form of poison gas, bombs, and other human weapons.”) I was, however, able to interview descendants and family members of this remarkable group of young women, and a portrait of the smart, sarcastic, and deeply feeling Hannie Schaft began to emerge. I soon fell in love with her, too.

At first I assumed I would be writing a traditional nonfiction biography but then I reconsidered. Ultimately, inspired by Thomas Keneally’s beloved novel *Schindler’s List*, I decided to stick as closely as possible to the documented facts of Hannie’s life while balancing the needs of

narrative and pacing to make the book a compelling read in the category of historical fiction. Although I'll always worry about doing the real lives of these women justice, it was clear to me that writing Hannie's story as a novel was the best way I knew to try. I was intimidated by the weight of the responsibility. Yet I discovered that researching and writing *To Die Beautiful* actually helped me survive and grow during the five years of extreme politics that followed. Writing this book changed me.

In *To Die Beautiful*, we see Hannie transform from a shy, passive college student into a bold, armed guerrilla soldier. This remarkable evolution was only possible because Hannie had the courage to answer the same fundamental questions we all must face, whatever our circumstances. How do we live with integrity? Are we strong enough to love and be loved? And will we be strong enough to survive love's betrayal? Hannie's story also lays bare one of the foundational questions of human ethics: How far would we go to help a fellow human in need?

In particular, Hannie's example spurred me to act on behalf of immigrants and political refugees, which is where her own student activism began. My Jewish ancestors fled Russia in 1914, refugees from a campaign of genocide. As I learned from Hannie, refugee crises are the first warning signs of rising authoritarianism and political extremism. I started volunteering and protesting on behalf of immigrants—trying to do in 2022 what my great-grandmother did a century earlier: find a way for their families to survive. Although mine weren't dangerous or heroic acts, I learned that even small, direct work could be meaningful. I came to understand that no act of compassion is ever wasted.

I'm grateful to my friend for taking me to the Verzetsmuseum that cold December day six years ago. It was a visit that changed my life. And I'm so excited and proud to share the stories of these incredible women with the rest of the world! These brave young women, just teenagers when they began, who sacrificed everything in the hope of a better future. The future you and I now live in. A lot of things are clearer to me now than before I met Hannie. I hope it goes the same way for you.

When I began writing *To Die Beautiful* in 2017, I wondered if its relevance might fade by the time I finished it; unfortunately, its themes are as urgent now as they've ever been. As Truus and Freddie and Hannie said to each other so many times, pushing themselves to remain compassionate and keep fighting in the face of great evil:

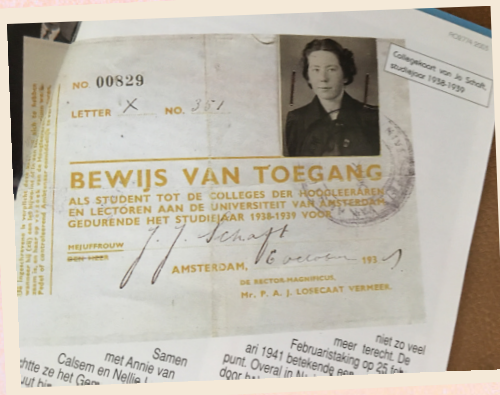
Blijf menselijk. Stay human.

Love,
Buzzy

Discussion Questions

1. What did you think of Hannie's mantra, "stay human" (*blijf menselijk*)? Do you think she stayed true to her values throughout her journey? What does "stay human" mean to you?
2. Many Dutch citizens were opposed to Nazi occupation, but it was far rarer to join active resistance groups. What do you think ultimately drove Hannie to actively resist? What qualities and experiences took her from a shy student of law to the feared and revered "Girl with Red Hair"? Does Hannie's resistance carry any lessons for us today, and if so, what are they?
3. What drew Sonja, Philine, and Hannie together initially? How did Sonja and Philine differ in their mindset about Nazi oppression? Were you surprised with Sonja's ultimate decision?
4. Were you familiar with Hannie's or Freddie and Truus' story before reading *To Die Beautiful*? How is the experience reading a novel based on a true story different from reading a completely fictional story? Were there any parts of the story or facts about life during the occupation that surprised you? Did you learn anything new about World War II or the Netherlands from this book?
5. What did you make of Hannie and Jan's relationship? Especially in light of the revelation that comes about his life before the war?
6. There are so many harrowing and heartbreaking scenes in *To Die Beautiful*, which scene affected you the most and why?
7. Hannie's sister, Annie, features in the novel only in memory. How did you understand their relationship and the impact Annie had on Hannie's life?
8. Wartime is filled with impossible decisions, which this novel highlights in various ways. Did this novel make you think about the ways you would have acted when faced with these circumstances? Which character had the biggest effect on you and why?
9. Did you have a favorite quote or passage from the book?
10. The Afterword reveals what happened after the war to many of the real people in the story. Did it surprise you?

Research Photos



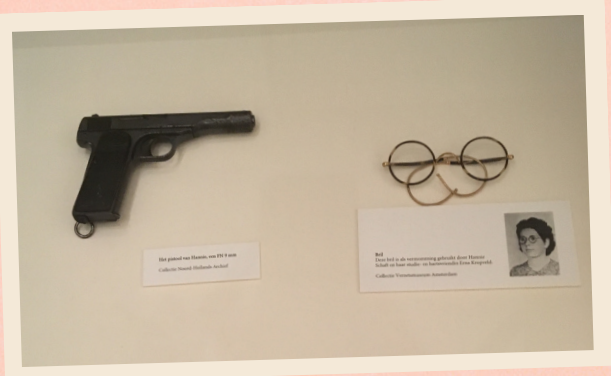
Hannie Schaft's student ID card. Hannie was a law student before joining the Dutch resistance.



Photo of the real Hannie Schaft, taken between 1938 and 1940



Author Buzzy Jackson (left) with Katinka Kenter (right), daughter of Truus Oversteegen



Hannie's pistol and fake glasses, which she used to disguise herself on resistance missions.