A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF ETTY HILLESUM (1914–1943)

Klaas A.D. Smelik
(Etty Hillesum Onderzoekscentsrum, Ghent University)

Esther (Etty) Hillesum was born on 15 January 1914 in her parents’ home at Molenwater 77 in Middelburg, the capital of Zeeland, where her father Levie (Louis) Hillesum had been teaching classical languages (Greek and Latin) since 1911. In Amsterdam, on 7 December 1912, he had married Etty’s mother, Riva (Rebecca) Bernstein, who went with him to Middelburg. Etty’s father was born in Amsterdam on 25 May 1880, the youngest of four children, to the merchant Jacob Samuel Hillesum and his wife Esther Hillesum-Loeza; Etty, therefore, was named after her paternal grandmother. The family lived at the time at Sint Antoniesbreestraat 31, Amsterdam.

Louis Hillesum studied classical languages at the University of Amsterdam. In 1902, he took his bachelor’s, followed in 1905 by his master’s (both degrees cum laude). On 10 July 1908, he defended his thesis De imperfecti et aoristi usu Thucydidis (also awarded cum laude). Middelburg was his first teaching assignment. In 1914, he began teaching classical languages at the Hilversum Gymnasium (grammar school), but, due to deafness in one ear and impaired vision, had trouble maintaining order in the large classes at that institution. That is why, in 1916, he moved to the smaller Gymnasium in the town of Tiel in the middle of the Netherlands. In 1918, he became teacher of classics and deputy headmaster in Winschoten in the North-Eastern part of the Netherlands. In 1924, he was appointed to similar positions at the Gymnasium in Deventer, where he became headmaster (Dutch: ‘rector’) on 1 February 1928. He remained there until his forced dismissal on 29 November 1940, at the request of the German occupier.

Louis Hillesum has been described as a small, quiet and unobtrusive man, a stoic, scholarly recluse with a great deal of humour and erudition. In the lower forms, he had at first experienced serious difficulties maintaining order and in response became an extremely strict teacher. In the higher forms, however, he came into his own. Although interested in Judaism, Louis Hillesum was highly assimilated; he worked, for example, on Saturdays. In Deventer, he was among the city’s
leading citizens, and even in Camp Westerbork he maintained these contacts and his cultural interests.

His wife Riva was born to Michael Bernstein and Hinde Lipowsky on 23 June 1881 in Pochep (Russia). Following a pogrom, she was the first person in her family to leave Surazh (Chernigol) and come to Amsterdam on 18 February 1907. She moved in with the Montagnu family, at number 21 on the Tweede Jan Steenstraat. Her profession at that time was recorded as Russian-language teacher. On 29 May of that same year, her younger brother Jacob, a diamond cutter, followed, and moved in with the Montagnu family as well. On 10 June 1907, her parents arrived in Amsterdam from Surazh. They moved into the second floor of the house on the Tweede Jan Steenstraat. On 9 January 1913, Jacob married Marie Mirkin, who had come from Warsaw to Amsterdam on 5 May 1913. Their daughter Rahel Sarra was born on 19 October of that year. Shortly afterwards, the entire family emigrated illegally to the United States; only Riva remained behind with Louis Hillesum, to whom she had been married on 7 December 1912.

Riva Hillesum-Bernstein has been characterized as lively, chaotic, extroverted and dominant. Etty’s relationship with her mother was a difficult one in the early years, but apparently improved while they were at Camp Westerbork. In addition to Etty, Riva Hillesum bore two more children: Jacob (Jaap), born in Hilversum on 27 January 1916 and named after Louis’ father, and Michael (Mischa), named after Riva’s father.

Jaap Hillesum completed the Gymnasium in 1933. He went on to study medicine, first at the University of Amsterdam and later at Leiden University. He was intelligent, wrote poems and was attractive to women. Mentally, he was unstable: he was committed to psychiatric hospitals on several occasions. During the war, he worked as an intern at the *Nederlandsch-Israelietisch Ziekenhuis* (Jewish hospital) in Amsterdam.

Mischa Hillesum was born on 22 September 1920 at Winschoten. Even as a child, he exhibited striking musical talent. In 1931, he moved to Amsterdam, where he attended the famous Vossius Gymnasium for three years and spent the rest of his time studying piano. His mentor was the famous Dutch pianist George van Renesse (1909–1994). Around 1939, he was committed to *Het Apeldoornsche Bos* (at that time the Jewish mental asylum in the Netherlands) and treated for schizophrenia. Even after his release, he continued to be extremely unstable.