LET'S TALK ABOUT HOPE!
ETTY HILLESUM'S FUTURE-PERSPECTIVE—
“WE MAY SUFFER, BUT WE MUST NOT SUCCUMB”

Manja Pach
( Etty Hillesum Centre Deventer, The Netherlands)

Etty Hillesum writes about the future in a way that clearly shows her perspective. She hoped to play a role in post-war times, and the decision to share the fate of her people was not inspired by resignation. She describes herself as a witness of this time, as a writer. She wanted to go to Russia and Japan. Even at the end of her life, she had her dreams:

All I wanted to say is this: The misery here is quite terrible; and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then, time and again, it soars straight from my heart—I can’t help it, that’s just the way it is, like some elementary force—the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage and every fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer, but we must not succumb. And if we should survive unhurt in body and soul, but above all in soul, without bitterness and without hatred, then we shall have a right to a say after the war. Maybe I am an ambitious woman: I would like to have just a tiny little bit of a say.1

1 E.T., 616. Etty, 657: Ik wilde alleen maar dit zeggen: de ellende is werkelijk groot en toch loop ik dikwijls, later op de avond, als de dag achter je in een diepte weggezonken is, met een veerkrachtige pas langs het prikkeldraad en dan stijgt er altijd weer uit m’n hart naar boven—ik kan er niets aan doen, het is nu eenmaal zo, het is van een elementaire kracht—; dit leven is iets prachtigs en iets groots, we moeten nog een hele nieuwe wereld opbouwen later—en tegen iedere wandaad te meer en gruwelijkheid te meer hebben wij een stukje liefde en goedheid te meer tegenover te stellen, dat we in onszelf veroveren moeten. We mogen wel lijken, maar we mogen er niet onder bezwijken. En als we deze tijd ongeschonden overleven, naar lichaam en naar ziel, maar vooral naar ziel, zonder verbittering, zonder haat, dan hebben we ook het recht om een woord mee te spreken na de oorlog. Misschien ben ik wel een ambitieuze vrouw: ik zou een heel klein woordje mee willen spreken.
Etty’s love of life—despite her physical and mental problems—was always important to me. I was nearly her age when I read her letters for the first time and I felt strongly that she could have been my beloved sister, or a good friend.

In fact, she met my father, Werner Stertzenbach, in Camp Westerbork; they had friends in common. My father organized a group who helped people escape. He told Etty Hillesum about his experiences in Germany and offered her the opportunity to flee, but she did not want to make use of this offer. “Stertzenbach’s brother (this is for Hans) is writing letters and in a moment will tell us more about his prison experiences,” Etty wrote on 29 November 1942.

My father told me that Etty Hillesum’s letters offered the most impressive descriptions of life in the camp and of the feelings of the people living there from transport to transport.

Reading Etty Hillesum’s letters from Camp Westerbork helped me to get nearer to what happened to my father and mother, who both survived, and to my grandparents, my uncles and aunts, who all went through this transit camp and were murdered in Auschwitz and Sobibor. I read them in 1971, when I was about Etty’s age.

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2 E.T., 577. Etty, 613: De broer van Stertzenbach (dit voor Hans) zit brieven te schrijven en wil ons straks nog iets van z’n gevangeniservaringen vertellen.

3 A few words of relevant personal history in terms of my relation to Etty Hillesum. I was born in Amsterdam in December 1945. My mother, Estella Pach, came from a Dutch, Amsterdam Jewish family (my grandfather was a diamond worker). Before and partly during the war, she taught at a school for textile-industry workers. She survived by going into hiding for two years. My mother was the only survivor of her family. My father, Werner Stertzenbach, was born in Germany (my grandfather had a painting business). Werner was not only Jewish, he was also a member of the Communist party and therefore especially threatened when the Nazis came to power in 1933. He escaped to Holland in the same year. He was not welcomed there, but he managed to stay, sometimes illegally, sometimes in jail. The Dutch authorities arrested him in 1937, he stayed in prison until 1940 and after the surrender of the Dutch army, the Dutch police gave him over to the Nazi police. They brought him to Camp Westerbork, where German Jews had already been imprisoned by the Dutch government. In 1943, he organized his own escape from the camp. He survived by hiding in Amsterdam. After the liberation, he decided to return to his country to make a contribution to a better Germany. My mother preferred to stay in Holland and raise me there. My German grandparents were also murdered in Poland. I studied law in Amsterdam (as Etty Hillesum did and at the same university). After finishing my studies, I stayed for a year with my father in Germany. In 1971, I visited the remains of the former transit camp Westerbork with my father. This visit made such a big impression on me that I started an initiative to build a memorial centre on that particular place (Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork). During that time, my father told me about the letters Etty Hillesum had written. These letters were illegally published during the war. In 1986, life and love led me to the small town of Deventer, where Etty Hillesum lived