

# **Steal a Pencil for Me**

**Opera in Two Acts**

**Music by Gerald Cohen, libretto by Deborah Brevoort**

**Length of complete two-act opera:  
approximately 2 hrs, 15 mins.**

## **Synopsis**

### **Act One**

#### *June 1943- Amsterdam*

The Nazis have occupied Holland for over three years. Although restrictions for Jews continue to mount, private gatherings are still tolerated. The opera opens at Lisette's birthday party in her apartment in Amsterdam. Jaap Polak laments his unhappy marriage with his flirtatious wife Manja, but he and Manja have agreed to stay together until the end of the war. He is instantly drawn to Ina Soep when she enters with her parents and boyfriend Rudi Acohen. Jaap imagines what it would be like to be married to Ina. The party is interrupted when the Nazis arrive and seize several people, including Rudi.

#### *September 1943- Westerbork Transit Camp*

Manja, Jaap, his parents, and Lisette are deported from Amsterdam to Westerbork, a transit camp in Northern Holland. As everyone arrives, they are submitted to "Administration" and are assigned to a barrack. Several long-time prisoners tell them about Tuesday Transport, the dreaded weekly deportation of a quota of prisoners for "resettlement to the east." Ina enters with her parents; they have also been sent to Westerbork. Jaap arranges for Manja and himself to be in the same the barrack to which Ina and her family have been assigned. Jaap approaches Ina, who rebuffs him because he is married.

Ina, alone and upset, has an imaginary conversation with Rudi, who tells her to do everything she can to survive so that they can be reunited in the future. Jaap appears and approaches Ina again, and she agrees to take a walk with him. Jaap tells her that one way to survive the present horror is to imagine a better future. They pledge to tell each other everything, even the small details of everyday life, in order to survive and preserve a sense of some normalcy amid the fear and imprisonment of their lives in the camp.

#### *November 1943*

The Commandant enters and announces that it is time for Tuesday Transport. Jaap's parents are on the list. Jaap escorts his parents to the train for transport, where he gives his father his shoes, as there is nothing else he can do for him. Jaap picks up and pockets the pencil discarded by the Commandant after checking off the names of the deportees. Jaap uses the pencil to write a love note to Ina, but cannot find a way to get it to her. He finally asks Lisette to pass the note to Ina, and Ina also asks Lisette to pass her reply back to Jaap, without telling Lisette they are love notes. Lisette grows curious and reads the letters.

#### *February 1944*

The Commandant holds his weekly cabaret where Jewish prisoners are expected to perform. Lisette sings a saucy cabaret song quoting parts of Jaap's letters to Ina, and all of the prisoners gossip about the budding romance between Jaap and Ina. At the end of the cabaret, the Commandant pulls out a list for Tuesday Transport and Ina despairs on hearing that Jaap and Manja are on the list.

## Act Two

### *May 1944 - Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp*

Jaap and Manja have been sent to Bergen-Belsen in Germany, a much harsher camp than Westerbork; they have been in the camp for three months. The curtain rises on Roll Call, a process that requires the prisoners to stand outside for hours while the Nazis count and recount everyone obsessively. At the end of the scene Ina and her family enter; they, too, have been sent to Bergen-Belsen.

Jaap and Ina meet behind the barracks. They talk about their dreams for the future and their dreams of simple things like having an “ordinary breakfast,” sitting at a table, and buying a loaf of bread. Manja and Abraham Soep (Ina’s father) enter, finding Jaap and Ina behind the barracks. Manja and Soep insist that Jaap and Ina stop seeing each other. Jaap and Ina agree, but decide to carry on their relationship by writing letters. But Jaap no longer has a pencil. As Ina is now working in the Commandant’s office, Jaap tells Lisette to give Ina a message: “Steal a pencil for me.” Lisette passes the message to Ina.

### *Fall 1944*

Ina overhears the Nazis talking about what is taking place at Auschwitz. She tells the other prisoners; many do not believe it possible, thinking these rumors are just another ploy by the Nazis to scare and torment the prisoners. Ina, sickened by the rumors, leaves the barracks. She has another imaginary conversation with Rudi and asks him if he is still alive. Ina begins to realize that all hope of Rudi surviving is slipping away.

### *March 1945*

Months have passed and Ina and Jaap have continued writing, giving each other the will to survive day by day. It is Passover. Ina sends a letter to Jaap telling him that the story of the Exodus from Egypt can lift his spirits. During Roll Call, as several prisoners die of exhaustion, the others express their individual yearnings for freedom against the constant struggle of camp life.

### *April 1945 - leaving Bergen-Belsen*

Everyone in the camp suddenly receives orders to leave. Jaap and Manja are put on a train heading east; Ina, on a train headed west. As Jaap and Ina travel in opposite directions, they are surrounded by people dying from typhoid fever. Liberation finally comes, but when it does, Jaap succumbs to the fever and collapses in a coma.

### *June 1945- Amsterdam*

Everyone waits for news of their loved ones; it takes a long time for the few survivors to reconnect. Manja finds Ina, who has been searching for Jaap, and tells her that Jaap has survived, but barely; Jaap then enters, looking emaciated—but alive. Before they can begin their lives together they both say their goodbyes to their pasts - Ina emotionally releases the deceased Rudi, and Manja grants Jaap a divorce. Jaap and Ina sit down at a table to eat an “ordinary breakfast.”

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**Cast of Characters**  
(9 principals + chorus)  
(Character descriptions on next page)

**Ina Soep** (Lyric Soprano)

**Jaap Polak** (Baritone)

**Manja Polak** (Mezzo)

**Rudi Acohen** (Lyric Tenor)

**Abraham Soep** (Ina's Father) (Bass)

**Lisette** (Cabaret Mezzo), the Messenger of Love

**The Commandant** (Bass Baritone or Baritone), the Messenger of Death.

**Nazis/SS Guards (2)** (Baritone and Bass)

**Chorus:** Amsterdam party-goers in Act 1, Scene 1 and later, the Prisoners of Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen. **(minimum of 8) \***

- (Ina's Mother and Jaap's parents will be in the chorus)

**Orchestra**

Projected: A chamber orchestra of approx. 24 instruments (small string section (44321), single winds, single brass, piano, percussion) that can be expanded, if need be, for larger productions. Note: in the April 2013 performance, we used a smaller instrumental ensemble of 4 players.

**Time and Place**

Act 1: Amsterdam; Westerbork Transit camp (1943-1944)

Act 2: Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp; Amsterdam (1944-1945)

## Character Descriptions

**Ina Soep:** 20-years old, from a wealthy family in Amsterdam involved in the Diamond business. Ina is a strikingly beautiful young woman who is intelligent, down to earth and knows her own mind. Ina possesses social grace and manners; her challenge during the war is to not give in to despair. Ina is a clear-eyed realist.

**Jaap Polak:** 30-years old, from a middle class Orthodox family in Amsterdam. An accountant. Married to Manja. Jaap has a tremendous willpower to survive. He is smart, clever, enterprising, down-to-earth and practical. Jaap is an unabashed and relentless optimist who is also cultured, intellectual and spiritual

**Manja Polak:** 24-years old; Married to Jaap Polak. An outgoing, high-spirited young woman who loves to dance and flirt. A social butterfly with a sharp tongue. Manja is mercurial and cultured.

**Rudi Acohen.** 20-years old; Ina's boyfriend. Rudi comes from a Sephardic family that is involved in the stock broker business in Amsterdam. He is a level-headed, polite young man. Steady.

**Abraham Soep:** 50 years old; Ina's Father. He is very influential in the Jewish community in Amsterdam; he runs the second largest diamond factory in Holland at the time of the Nazi occupation. He is also president of the governing body of Amsterdam's Synagogues.

**Lisette:** in her 30's. A working class woman who is sociable, lusty, funny and smart. Lisette is the kind of person that is comfortable in any social group. Even the Nazi guards in the camps give her a (somewhat) free rein to come and go around the camp.

**The Commandant:** In his 40's. An aloof figure who is obsessed with order.

**Nazis:** two men in their 30's that run the camps and carry out the Commandant's orders.

**Chorus Members:** will play the roles of Amsterdam Jews, and later the prisoners of the Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps.