

# **Things We Couldn't Say**

## **by Diet Eman with James Schaap**

### About the Book

*Things We Couldn't Say* is the inspiring true story of Diet Eman, a young Dutch woman, who, with her fiancé, Hein Sietsma, risked everything to rescue imperiled Jews in Nazi-occupied Holland during World War II. Throughout the years that Diet and Hein aided the Resistance — work that would cost Diet her freedom and Hein his life — their courageous effort ultimately saved the lives of hundreds of Dutch Jews. Possessing all the emotional impact of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and all the drama of *The Hiding Place*, Diet Eman's *Things We Couldn't Say* is an unforgettable story of heroism, faith, and — above all — love.

### Praise for the Book

“Diet Eman is one of the unsung heroes of the World War II Dutch resistance against the Nazis. Her dramatic story, written in first person, is based on her diaries, letters to and from the man she loved, and her personal recollections. . . . Moving.”

— *Bookstore Journal*

“A splendidly uplifting account of heroism against the odds. . . . Eman's story (including her own capture, incarceration, and interrogation at the hands of the Gestapo) reads like a thriller of great emotional intensity, the latter provided through her love for her fiancé and fellow-resister Hein, who does not survive capture and deportation to Germany, and her constant arguments with God. This is a life-affirming book .”

— *Jewish Chronicle*

“The combination of an engaging style and the author's personal experiences during the emergence of the Nazis' anti-Semitic policy and programs make this account compelling reading, full of powerful, vivid details.”

— **Irvin J. Borowsky,**  
**Anne Frank Institute of Philadelphia**

*Courtesy of Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.*

## About the Authors

**Diet Eman** is included among the “Righteous Gentiles” at Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. She studied nursing after World War II and worked as a head nurse in Venezuela and as a foreign correspondent and export manager in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where she still resides.

**James Schaap** is professor of English at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa. A prize-winning author, he has also written a readers-theater version of the life of Diet Eman by the same title.

## Author Interview

*The Jewish Standard*, April 5, 2007

Dutch-born former Resistance fighter Berendina Diet Eman did not realize she felt like an American until she visited Europe recently and began to say “we” when she meant “Americans.” Returning to Michigan, where she has lived since 1969 — she lived in New York for 10 years before that — she applied for U.S. citizenship.

“It was very funny,” said Eman, who will turn 87 next month and became a citizen three weeks ago. “When I filled out the forms, they asked:

‘Have you ever been in prison?’ ‘Yes’

‘Have you ever been deported?’ ‘Yes’

‘Have you ever tried to topple a foreign government?’ ‘Yes’”

“Fortunately,” she said, “I carry my ‘pride and glory,’ a piece of parchment from Dwight D. Eisenhower personally thanking me for helping the Allied soldiers escape.” With that memento, and the help of a local congressman, Eman was given a private ceremony marking her new citizenship.

In a telephone interview with *The Jewish Standard*, Eman said she was “very angry” when the Germans invaded Holland in 1940, when she was just 20 years old. Raised as a religious Christian, and having many Jewish friends and co-workers, she was outraged at the German treatment of “our Jews.”

“The Jews had a right to be here,” she said. “The Germans did not. We are smaller than Rhode Island,” she added, “but we had 182,000 Jews.” She explained that Jews had started coming to the Netherlands in the 1400s, when they were expelled first by Spain and Portugal and later by other European countries.

At the time the Nazis came, said Eman, “I was dating a wonderful man. We couldn’t believe what was happening,” she said, expressing disappointment in countries like Sweden that did not oppose Hitler. “But Norway fought very hard,” she said.

Eman, who said she had a rigorous high school education and learned four languages, including German, noted that she heard a German official tell people in Holland not to worry, that Germany would respect the country’s neutrality. “Then they started with our Jews,” she said. “I was furious. They were such big liars.”

Enraged by the restrictions being placed on her Jewish friends, she and a small group of friends, including her fiancé, Hein Sietsma, joined the Dutch resistance, risking their lives to hide Jews, steal false papers, bomb German facilities, and rescue Allied soldiers. Sietsma was killed after being deported to Germany; Eman spent two years eluding the Nazis and was ultimately imprisoned. Together, they managed to save hundreds of Dutch Jews.

“Everyone I approached was willing to help,” she said, adding that “the Christian Reformed Church did the most. It had the highest percentage of members in the Resistance movement. The Communists had the second highest.” It wasn’t until after the war that Eman learned that only 23,000 Dutch citizens had been active in the Resistance. But “this didn’t include helpers,” she said, “like the people who hid Jews in their homes.”

Noting that “Calvinists are fanatic about what they believe in,” she said her motto was “it’s better to die for what you believe than live as a compromise.”

Eman said that she learned after the war that Hitler expected no resistance from the Dutch. “We’re blond and blue-eyed so he thought we were Aryans,” she said. “He thought we would beg him to be a province of Germany, so he told his soldiers to treat us gently.” Allotting only one day for the overthrow of the Dutch government, she said, Hitler became enraged when the Dutch resisted. “We’re very stubborn,” she said. “After five days he got angry and ordered the bombardment of Rotterdam” — an assault that killed 32,000 people and destroyed many beautiful old cathedrals.

Eman said the two years she spent hiding from the Nazis were difficult and frightening, but that she took comfort from the Bible. “I loved the Book of David,” she said, quoting from Psalm 27. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? . . . For He will hide me in His shelter in the day of trouble; He will conceal me under the cover of His tent; He will set me high on a rock.”

“He literally did this for me,” she said, noting that she was able to live for two years with false papers despite the fact that the Nazis came to her parents’ home every day looking for her. When she was arrested because of having forged papers, the Nazis still did not learn her true identity. Quoting from another psalm, “Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see,” Eman said she presented herself “as a very stupid person.” After spending one month in a small cell at the Vught concentration camp, she was released together with the widows of the male prisoners who had been executed.

Acknowledging that she had “a terrific fear of torture,” she said she particularly feared having her fingernails pulled out. “I still get nervous when I see uniforms and I scream when anyone touches my nails. I can never get my nails done.”

Leaving prison, she returned to her work with the Resistance. Each month, she said, the men in the movement stole blank IDs and other provisions for Jews, while the women, less likely to be searched by the Germans, distributed the materials. It was dangerous work: Of her original 15-member Resistance group, eight were killed.

“All the Jews we helped made it through,” said Eman, who in 1998 received an award from Yad Vashem as one of the “Righteous Among the Nations” and was also presented with the Resistance Cross by Queen Beatrix and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands.

After the war, Eman studied nursing. Her medical skills, combined with fluency in Spanish, won her a position with Shell Oil in Venezuela, which was building a hospital there together with a new refinery. She worked with the company for 10 years before meeting and marrying an American and moving to the United States.

In recent years, Eman has taken up the role of activist once again. In 1994, reacting to the growing number of revisionist historians, she co-authored *Things We Couldn't Say* with James C. Schapp, a professor of English at Dordt College in Iowa. The first-person narrative includes diary entries and excerpts from personal letters between Eman and her fiancé, detailing their thoughts and emotions throughout the war years.

“I tell people who doubt the Holocaust that I was there,” she said. “They are seeing an old lady who was there.”

“I tell them that life is making choices. You must make honest choices or you can't live with yourself. I don't go to war films but I did see ‘Schindler's List’ and I cried all through it. But afterwards I said, ‘Thank God I did something.’ You can't go back. How can you live with yourself if you don't do something?”

*Courtesy of The Jewish Standard*

## Discussion Questions

1. How would Diet have felt if she hadn't done something?
2. Diet says her choice was an obvious one because it was the right thing to do. Was her choice an easy one?
3. How does Diet deal with anger in the concentration camp? Would it be different for you?
4. Can you explain what happens to her when she goes before the judges in the concentration camp?
5. Diet knew that joining the resistance meant she could lose her life. Do you think she had any understanding of this at age 23?
6. There are many resistance leaders that came out of the Netherlands — Corrie Ten Boom, the secretary that hid Anne Frank's family (Miep Gies) and now Diet's compelling story. What does this say about the country as a whole? What does it say about that time period?
7. What kind of hope did Hein's last letter give to Diet? What about his co-prisoner's testimonial that her fiancé was a light in the darkness?
8. Why does Diet write this account when she didn't speak of it for years?
9. Diet becomes a nurse for the Red Cross. Is there a direct link between her life's vocation and her resistance work?
10. Is courage different today than it was in the 1940s?
11. How do you think Diet felt when people said the holocaust was a hoax? How do you feel?