

Anne Frank was one of the 200 Jewish Merwedeplein residents who were killed in the war. Historian Rian Verhoeven (60) delved into the history of fifty families on the square. "I wanted to know those lives."

The Merwedeplein was a kind of village before the war. The residents knew each other and the children of the square often played outside until late. Life went smoothly. "There was hardly any mention of the square in pre-war newspapers, at most nothing is written about a collision with eye damage or burglary," says Rian Verhoeven, author of the book *Anne Frank was not alone* .

It was a melting pot of Catholics, Protestants and Jews, Verhoeven says. The professions varied: from diamond worker, merchant and lawyer to secretary and hat maker. From 1933 many Jewish families of German, Austrian and Russian descent came to live on the square , including Anne Frank's family. Some residents were orthodox, others liberal and assimilated. They had one thing in common: their income was sufficient to pay the high rents.

Historian Verhoeven describes in her book daily life on Merwedeplein between 1933 and 1945: the persecution, collaboration, the betrayal and the resistance. She searched police reports, diaries, letters and archives to sketch the lives of nearly fifty families. She also spoke with some thirty former residents and their relatives.

"I describe the difficult choices and dilemmas that residents were confronted with. Some families reported after a call, others went into hiding or fled. Many were betrayed and sent to an extermination camp, "says Verhoeven, who worked for the Anne Frank House for 25 years and wrote several books about the Second World War and Anne Frank.

She came to live at Merwedeplein in 2003. Two years later, during the unveiling of the statue of Anne Frank, the idea for her book came into being. "During that unveiling, I looked at the square and wondered which stories were hidden behind the other front doors. I wanted to know those lives. "

Saved rental archive

The Merwedeplein had 122 apartments. In 1933, a third of the residents were Jewish. In 1941 that number had risen to more than half. "It was a pigeon house. It was a coming and going of tenants."

An employee of the technical department of the Hilwis complex had saved the rental archive. "He sometimes came to my door to bring things. One time he found a letter from a resident in her attic to her children, another time he told a story about an NSB person who lived in the square. That's how the ball started rolling for this book. "



At the time, the Jewish family Kohnstam lived in Verhoeven's house. About ten years ago, Pieter Kohnstam (1936), who came to live on Merwedeplein in 1938, was at her door. "He asked if he could see the house he had so many memories of," says Verhoeven.

Pieter's father, Hans Kohnstam, worked in a toy wholesaler in Fürth in southern Germany. In 1933 he fled in a hurry with his wife Ruth to Amsterdam. Later Ruth's mother, Clara Habermann, came to live with them.

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"They went out a lot and had a good time here, although they were also homesick and had to live smaller. It was of course also a financial loss because Hans had lost his job. "

Son Pieter played with the children on the square. One of those children who took care of him was Anne Frank. "Anne read to him, came to his house and sometimes went for a walk with him," says Verhoeven.

Tensions rose after the outbreak of the war. On 5 July 1942, 22 residents of Merwedeplein were the first to be called upon to register for employment in Germany, including Margot Frank and the Kohnstam family. Of these 22, 14 responded to the call, 5 of them fled abroad and 3 went into hiding.



On the advice of their doctor C. Sleeswijk, the Kohnstammen fled to Spain with help from the resistance and 'passers' via Maastricht, Belgium and France. After a dangerous journey, they boarded a boat to Argentina ten months later. "They were very lucky."

Clara, Pieter's grandmother, stayed behind in Amsterdam. Because of her age she could not make the trip. It was agreed with milkman Johannes that he would come and get her if she wanted to go into hiding. As a sign, she had to put a Delft blue teapot in front of the window. "Johannes transported her one day on a cart under horse blankets to a hiding place. I could not find out more about this milkman. He was such a man who stood out and offered help. He had to be careful because NSB members also lived on the square. "

Clara Haberman survived the war. An exceptional story, says Verhoeven. "There were few full Jewish families who survived the war." Anne's girlfriend

In the end, an estimated 200 Jews from Merwedeplein were killed. One of them was Louis Asscher, who worked in the diamond factory of his cousins Abraham and Joseph Asscher in the Tolstraat. He always knew how to properly inform the residents, because his cousin Abraham was on the Jewish Council. Children hung on his lips as he told stories in the square. He was arrested during a raid.

Rian Verhoeven, Anne Frank was not alone - Het Merwedeplein 1933-1945, Uitgeverij Prometheus, 24.99 euros.

Hilwis complex

More than four thousand German Jews fled to Amsterdam in 1933. Anne Frank's family was one of hundreds of families who settled over the years on Merwedeplein, which at the time was part of the Plan Zuid urban expansion, designed by architect HP Berlage. There were 122 rental properties on the square, which were part of the so-called Hilwis complex with the 'skyscraper', at that time the highest residential tower in the Netherlands .

Due to the high rent, the houses were only reserved for the middle class. There was a bathroom with bathtub and central heating, which was a big exception in Amsterdam.

From 1942, the Rivierenbuurt, including Merwedeplein, was one of the three 'Jewish' neighborhoods designated by the Germans. Jews from 'outside' had to settle in that neighborhood. On 5 July 1942, 22 residents of the square received a call to register for employment in Germany. New calls and raids followed. Most residents responded to the calls and ended up in extermination camps, a smaller part fleeing or hiding in hiding places in their own homes or at other addresses.