

A Nazi Soldier Stole a Watch in 1942. It turned Up 80 Years Later.

The watch, made as a gift in 1910, has been returned to the maker's family in the Netherlands. It still works.



By Claire Moses

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After nearly 80 years, a watch that was taken by a Nazi soldier during World War II, lost in a cornfield and later hidden in a clock on a farm in Belgium has been returned to the grandchildren of its maker.

And it still works.

“I think it’s really beautiful and remarkable that this all came together,” said Richard van Ameijden, the grandson of the watchmaker. “It came right out of the blue.”

The pocket watch was crafted in 1910 by Alfred Overstrijd, a Jewish man from the Dutch city of Rotterdam who was then learning to be a watchmaker. He made it as a gift for his brother, Louis, for his 18th birthday. An inscription on the back of the watch includes Mr. Overstrijd’s name and the place and time it was made as well as the fact that it was intended for his brother.

In 1942, Louis Overstrijd was arrested by the Nazis, at which point it’s likely that a soldier took the watch from him, or from his house, according to Rob Snijders, a Dutch historian who specializes in Jewish history. Both Overstrijd brothers were ultimately sent to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz and did not survive the Holocaust.

For Mr. van Ameijden, the reunion with his grandfather’s watch was uplifting, but it was also a rude awakening to continuing atrocities.

“When I look at the watch, it touches me partly because there’s a war now as well,” Mr. van Ameijden said, referring to Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine. “I imagine that children and older people who are sleeping in subway stations in a bombed Mariupol are holding their belongings. I think of that when I see this watch.”

How the watch traveled from Louis Overstrijd in Rotterdam to a cornfield in the Flemish part of Belgium is not entirely known, but Mr. Snijders, the historian, has reconstructed the journey.



The historian Rob Snijders, left, with the descendants of Alfred Overstrijd and Gustave Janssens and the pocket watch that connects them, in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, this month.
Pieter Janssens

During the war, people across Belgium and the Netherlands were forced to accommodate Nazi soldiers. A Belgian farmer named Gustave Janssens housed three soldiers and, unhappy about the situation, made them use a cornfield next door as a bathroom. It’s likely that the watch fell from the pocket of one of the soldiers in the field, Mr. Snijders said.

When Mr. Janssens found the watch, he must have noticed the Dutch name on the back and figured that the soldier had stolen it, Mr. Snijders explained. Instead of giving it back, the farmer hid it inside a clock in his house.

Which is where it stayed for the next 80 years.

Recently, the farm in Belgium was sold and members of Mr. Janssens’s family went through the belongings, Pieter

Janssens, the farmer's grandson, said. By chance, he said, the family came upon the pristine pocket watch made in 1910, with the inscription on the back.

He then emailed Mr. Snijders, in an effort to trace the watch to its original owner.

Such requests can be difficult, Mr. Snijders said. "It's very complex, most of the time it doesn't work," he said. "It can take years."

Finding remnants of Jewish history in Rotterdam is difficult. In May 1940, Germany bombed the city, wiping out its center, killing 1,150 people and destroying 24,000 homes. In the Netherlands as a whole, about 75 percent of the Jewish population was killed in the Holocaust.

Still, Mr. Snijders posted details of the watch's history on social media and hoped for the best.

Within 24 hours, Mr. Snijders received the information that the watchmaker, Alfred Overstrijd, had a daughter who had survived the war and had three children living in the Netherlands. (Louis Overstrijd, the owner of the watch, did not have children.)

Mr. Snijders later found Mr. van Ameijden, one of the watchmaker's three grandchildren, on LinkedIn. He arranged a meeting between the descendants of the farmer and the watchmaker, during which the watch was officially handed back. "There were tears, I saw them," said Mr. Snijders, who attended the two-hour gathering this month in Rotterdam, which was earlier reported by Radio Rijnmond, a Dutch radio station.



The image shows a screenshot of a Twitter post. At the top, the user's name is "Jacco van Giessen" with a verified account icon and the handle "@jaccovangiessen". The text of the tweet is in Dutch: "Hoe het horloge van opa Alfred na bijna 80 jaar weer terugkwam naar #Rotterdam; een verhaal dat begint met een wildpoepende Duitse soldaat in een Vlaams korenveld. luister hieronder of lees het verhaal van @CelinevdBurg_ rijnmond.nl/nieuws/1487349 @RTV_Rijnmond @joodsamsterdam". Below the text is a large empty rectangular area with the text "Watch on Twitter" in the top right corner. At the bottom of the tweet, it shows the time "6:21 PM · Apr 10, 2022", a heart icon with the number "8", a speech bubble icon with the word "Reply", and a link icon with the text "Copy link". At the very bottom of the screenshot is a blue button that says "Explore what's happening on Twitter".

Mr. van Ameijden said he and his sisters would share possession of the watch for the time being, and that they regretted that their mother was not alive to see the heirloom from her father, with whom she was close.

Mr. van Ameijden said he and his sisters didn't know much about their grandfather's fate, and had not known about the

watch. “My parents really had a war trauma,” Mr. van Ameijden said. “We know some snippets, but it wasn’t a topic of conversation.”

Mr. Janssens, the grandson of the Belgian farmer, said his family had known about the watch but had largely forgotten about it, and that he was happy that it had been returned to its rightful owners, as his grandfather would have wanted. “It’s a story that must not be lost,” he said.