

VU Amsterdam objects and their stories

1940-1945: The war plaque

[Caption: the plaque with names of the WWII fallen in the VU Main Building (from the Protestants Erfgoed [Reformed Heritage] photo collection | HDC, VU)]

Across from the Aula in the main building, under the watchful eye of [VU-founder Abraham Kuyper](#), hang two plaques commemorating those who fell during the Second World War. These plaques were originally installed in the hall of the former [university building at Keizersgracht 162](#) in 1952, and then given a place in Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam's new main building on the De Boelelaan. Recently, the life stories of each of these victims were uncovered through research and brought together in the book *Een oorlogsplaquette ontrafeld [A war plaque unravelled]*. Assistant professor and Holocaust and oral history specialist Bettine Siertsema reflects on the plaque, the war-time history of VU itself and this publication.

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By Bettine Siertsema

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has no reason to regret its conduct during the Second World War. While it may have lacked an inspiring moment like Professor Cleveringa's [famous speech](#) in Leiden, in which he condemned the dismissal of his Jewish colleagues, VU did have a large number of students and professors who were [active in the resistance](#), which some of them paid for with their lives. The plaque in the hall across from the entrance to the Aula bears witness to this fact.

That location is intended to be prominent, though with dubious success: the plaque is rather easy to overlook, and I have yet to see a single student notice it on their own and pause in front of it. The memorial plaque itself offers rather meagre information. Dates of birth and death are lacking, as are the roles the commemorated played in the VU community – the 'Civitas Academica' – and the manner of their respective deaths. In fact, the list of names does not even distinguish between men and women. This brevity is no doubt a result of the many names to be included: 91 in total. Additional information would have required inflating the plaque to gigantic proportions.

Those who look closely at the memorial plaque will notice several irregularities in the three columns that make up the list of names: the name at the bottom of each column deviates from the alphabetical order observed in the preceding names. Also evident is the addition of an extra strip of bronze, apparently for the purpose of including a 91st name, E. Jüdel. It would seem that the decision to include this lab technician in the list was taken at a later point in time. She is one of the three women included, the other two being Jewish students, which is likely a reasonable reflection of the numeric distribution between the genders at the university in the 1940s.

This information can be found in the book [Een oorlogsplaquette ontrafeld \[A war plaque unravelled\]](#) (Amsterdam: Boom, 2020), which offers background information on how the plaque came to be, as well as on all the people named on it. In the first chapter, George Harinck lays out the entire decision-making process. It makes for entertaining reading, in a certain sense. His account touches not only on the various parties involved, each of whom had their own vision, and the power relationships between them – which certainly played a role – but also on the points that needed to be resolved in the ultimate choice of wording and other choices along the way. Should, for instance, a person who died a natural death while a prisoner (such as Edith Jüdel) be included, or someone killed by friendly fire from the Allies, or someone who drowned while attempting to escape? Do all these individuals meet the criteria of having died for Freedom and the Fatherland? In the extensive final chapter, Wim Berkelaar and Tjeerd de Jong have compiled the results of their painstaking historical investigation in the biographies of every person listed on the plaque.



Perhaps the second plaque, which hangs somewhat oddly under the first, is an expression of the never fully satisfying compromises that are an inevitable part of such a decision-making process. Professor [Ko \(Jacobus\) Oranje](#) was appointed Rector Magnificus in 1943 and played an important role in the resistance. In addition to coordinating all manner of resistance actions and escape routes, he and his colleague [Victor Rutgers](#) also established a system by which – following the closure of the universities – students could continue to attend clandestine lectures and sit exams in the professors' own homes. He died less than a year after the liberation and therefore should not have been included on the plaque. The inventive solution of mounting a second plaque below the first was an attempt to do right by Oranje after all – and simultaneously emphasised VU's perception of itself as 'university of the resistance' (a title that was not entirely deserved). The book *Een oorlogsplaquette ontrafeld* provides the quite essential background information on the names and other decisions that went into creating the two plaques.

Dr Bettine Siertsema is an assistant professor of Humanities at VU Amsterdam and the research institute CLUE+ who specialises in Holocaust literature and oral history.

Additional reading: Wim Berkelaar, Ab Flipse, George Harinck (ed.), Tjeerd de Jong and Gert van Klinken, *Een oorlogsplaquette ontrafeld. Het herdenkingsmonument 1940-1945 van de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* [A war plaque unravelled: The monument commemorating 1940-1945 at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] (Uitgeverij Boom, Amsterdam, 2020)

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