

## **Bitter Peace – Yom Hashoa**

Mirjam Sjelomieth Vrieslander was born on April 14, 1940, in Steenwijk, the Netherlands. Her middle name, Sjelomieth, means “Peace”. Yet, her life would become a bitter peace. Tomorrow would have been her birthday.

Mirjam’s father, Hijman Vrieslander, had served as rabbi, chazzan, and secretary of the Jewish community in Steenwijk since 1939. As the danger to Jews intensified, Hijman went into hiding with his wife Carolina and their two small children, Mirjam and Daniël, at my grandparents’ home in Kalenberg.

Even though the Vrieslander family were in hiding at my grandparents’ home, Hijman continued to ride his bicycle for about an hour to Steenwijk to look after his community. This greatly increased the danger for his life, and therefore he decided to give these two books to my grandfather, *History of the Jews* by Josef Kastein and *The Jewish Religion* by Michael Friedländer, asking him to pass them on to one of his family members if he would not return.

Hijman was arrested by the Dutch police at the end of August 1942, while on his way to perform a kosher slaughter. He was taken to a work camp and, a day later, transferred to Camp Westerbork. Carolina returned to their home and tried desperately to free her husband; when that failed, she asked to join him in Westerbork with the children. They remained there for eight long months, and on May 18, 1943, the Vrieslander family were transferred by train to Sobibor, Poland. A few days later, Hijman, Carolina, Mirjam, and Daniel were murdered in Sobibor.

The story of Mirjam and her family was not lost to time. My father had a special bond with Mirjam, they were the same age and had played together at my grandparents’ home. He wrote a memoir about her, which he called *A Bitter Peace*.

**I would like to share a passage from my father's memoir:**

‘As a two-year-old girl, Mirjam experienced how the daisies appeared in the grass field, how to blow the fluffy seeds from a dandelion, and how we played wildly in the sandbox. That is really the only memory I have of her. Playful, unaware, naturally enjoying life, full of expectation and energy. She is, for me, a symbol of guilt, of failure in the world in which I live, my small share of the collective guilt that continues to this day.’

Today, these books are the only tangible traces that remain of the Vrieslander family. After the war, my grandfather passed these books to my father, who tried to locate surviving relatives of the Vrieslander family, but he was unsuccessful. My father then gave the books to me, believing it was the right thing to do so that they would return to Jewish hands and be passed on “from dor to dor, from generation to generation.

Tonight, I wish to remember the Vrieslander family:

Hijman Vrieslander, Carolina Vrieslander-Cohen, Mirjam Sjelomieth Vrieslander, and Daniël Immanoeël Vrieslander.

יהי זכרם ברוך