



Archief Philip Staal

75 YEARS OF LIBERATION

Looting and Postwar Restoration of Rights

The Painting

Philip Staal

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The Painting—Chapter 67 of [Settling the Account](#)

The telephone rang a couple of times in the office before Joost answered it.

“I am calling with regard to your article, published in the September 17, 2005, edition of *De Telegraaf*, under the title ‘War Orphans in Revolt,’” said ninety-two-year-old Bert de Haan on the other end of the line. “Would you please be so kind as to give me Philip Staal’s telephone number, whom you mentioned in your article?”

Bert had some vague story about his parents and Philip’s mother. He said that his parents had received a painting and several other valuable articles from Philip’s mother for safekeeping.

“We do not give out personal details about the people we interview,” Joost replied. “But if you leave your phone number, I will see to it that Philip gets it. I’ll e-mail him your story and telephone number and ask him to call you. I’m afraid I can’t do anything more than that for you.”

A week later, I telephoned Bert full of expectations. I was hoping it had to do with one of my father’s paintings he had painted himself. I have four children, and only three tableaus painted by my father. But I heard, to my disappointment, that it had to do with a painting by the famous German painter Fay.

“The painting came into my parents’ possession during the war,”

said Bert. “My parents had a clothing shop in Hilversum. In the spring of 1943, a certain *Anna* came to see them and enquired if she could hang the painting for sale in the shop. But the painting wasn’t sold, and I now have it. It came from the married couple Anna and Isaac Staal and belongs to their family and must be given back to their family. When can you come to see me, so we can talk and [you can] pick up the painting? One of my daughters has already passed away; no one lives forever—I’m ninety-two, so my days in this world are numbered.”

It touched me that, more than sixty years after the war, there were still people who still had a conscience, and I replied, “I don’t know when I’ll be in the Netherlands again, but I’ll let you know in a couple of weeks.”

Excited, I told Henneke about the phone call.

“Wow, how fantastic for you! But why didn’t you set up an appointment with him right away? Why only after a couple of weeks? You have to go to Holland, right away—this week even!”

“Because I think it’s so special, I have to be well-prepared. It shows both the good and the evil in people. That is why I want a journalist and a photographer there when we meet. Besides, I still have to get some more information, because I cannot accept the painting if it did not belong to a family member of mine who was murdered in World War II.”

After looking into the matter, I came to the conclusion that the painting might very well have been part of my parents’ estate.

Henneke had to remind me several times to call Bert back. On October 12, 2005, half an hour before sunset, at the beginning of Yom Kippur, I felt it was the right moment to call Bert for a second time. I felt that I was finally up to meeting him personally.

I cautiously asked him, “Do you want to give the painting to me, or is there a price tag on it?”

“Not long ago the painting was valued at 50,000 euro, and it’s yours if you pay 100,000 euro,” said Bert.

I felt the blood rushing from my brains. After a few moments, I heard Bert's voice again. "Mr. Staal, are you still there? When will you be coming to pick up the painting?"

I slowly regained consciousness and then stammered. "During our first conversation you told me that my mother had given it to your parents to hang in the shop. So the painting didn't cost you anything and now you want 100,000 euro?"

"That is not true; my parents well and truly bought it."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"I saw a signed purchase agreement at the time and picked up the painting from your parents."

"Do you still have the purchase agreement?"

"No."

"Is the painting still in its original frame?"

"No, after the war, my parents had its value assessed so they could sell it. They needed the money. The painting underwent restoration, was cleaned and put into a new frame on the advice of the art dealer at the time. He thought this would increase its value.

I picked up the painting after a couple of weeks somewhere in the heart of downtown Utrecht. It looked gorgeous. It had its original bright colors again, and the new frame lent a luster to the painting dictated by time."

"How much did your parents pay for the painting at the time?"

"Together with the painting, I received from the owner of the studio an envelope with two letters and the old frame. One of the letters was the contract of sale for the painting, and the other a map of a backyard on Plantage Muidersgracht in Amsterdam. I don't remember the price that was mentioned in the agreement. Nor do I have any idea what became of these papers after I gave them to my father."

"During our first conversation, you said I could come and *fetch* the painting. 'The painting belongs to your family and should be given back'—that's what you said."

“What are you talking about? The painting is mine, and I haven’t even decided whether or not to leave it to my children or put it on sale.”

“But why did you call the newspaper and ask to speak to me?” I asked.

“That painting is a memento of your childhood and your deceased parents. It is worth more to you than just the market value; it has sentimental value. You are the only person who would be willing to pay a higher price than its estimated value.”

“Do you think it’s normal that people were robbed of all their possessions and then murdered during the war while people like you profit from it?”

“Yes,” Bert answered, “that’s just the way things go in life. One man’s breath is another man’s death. When are you coming, so we can discuss the details?”

Once again, I was disillusioned with mankind, sad, and furious at the same time. I had already informed the journalist but did not even want to meet this beast of a man. Would I be able to control myself if I was standing across from him? Or would I attack him and deliver a fatal blow to a ninety-two-year-old? He deserved it. But if I were to beat him to death, I would be just as evil as Bert. Wasn’t the price I would therefore have to pay be much too high for me and my family?

“It’s clear to me now: you’re the one who betrayed my parents, after you took the painting as payment from them to go into hiding. You’re guilty of my parents being murdered; you took their bequest, and now you want to collect interest on your criminal acts.” When it was silent on the other end of the line, I continued, “I don’t want to meet with bastards like you. Nor do I have the slightest desire to talk to them either.”

I slammed the receiver down on the phone and mused, *A fine way to come to your senses on Yom Kippur.*

I now know, almost certainly, who it was that betrayed my

parents.

As to my question—who was it who excavated and took away the chest with my parents' jewelry after the war?—it remains unanswered. I can no longer muster the mental strength to get to the bottom of that. Moreover, it all has to do with material value, and that's water under the bridge. The four people who knew about it are all dead. They took their secret with them to the grave.



Philip Staal

<https://www.staal.bz>

philip@staal.bz