

A message from Prof Gwyn Prins, son of Eli Prins, written for an event to mark the 60th Anniversary of the twinning of Alkmaar with Bath

“The twinning of Alkmaar with Bath is the product of a dark passage in the history of Europe. It is also a happy symbol of how evil times can be transcended; and it is testimony to the importance of not forgetting how we got here. Those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it. The man who forged this link never forgot that lesson: and were he writing this message instead of me, his son, in his place, I am sure he would say so.

Why Alkmaar? Why Bath? My father, Eli Prins, was born in 1904, in Alkmaar where the Prins family had lived for generations; and he died in Bath, where he lived his second life, and where I was born. Yet the thread which connected the two halves of his life was at one moment very tenuous indeed.

From 1932 my father had been secretly helping to prepare resistance to the Nazis; so, after the Dutch surrender (in 1940), he had to escape. My Grandmother was ready to accompany him, but not without her husband, who hesitated. They tried later, with my Uncle, failed, and all died in the gas chambers. During 15th/16th May 1940, without maps and passing through minefields and storms, the little fishing boat, ‘De Jonge Jochem’, brought my father – and sixty others – safely over the North Sea. My Aunt, Roos Heintje Prins-Tobin, was already married and living in Bath: so to Bath my father came.

It was his base during his war-time Intelligence career, helping prepare for D-Day, and his home during his post-war career as an historian of Dutch art.

He was, indeed, “The Great Escaper”, as the Bath Chronicle declared in its headline when reporting his death in 1995, two months after the 50th Anniversary of the Alkmaar/Bath twinning:

“The adventure-movie style story of Bath art lecturer, Eli Prins, a remarkable man who repeatedly cheated death throughout his life, and who played a vital role in forging the city’s relationship with Alkmaar in Holland, has finally ended”

Bath Chronicle

So, this celebration of the twinning of the city my father’s birth with the city of my birth is very special for me; personally, because it expresses the history of my family, shattered by war; and publicly because it validates my father’s hope when he united the liberators with the liberated – that the best guarantee of a bright future was to help people to know each other and to become friends. And, of course, the twinning of Alkmaar with Bath restored the circle of my father’s life: a defiantly patriotic Dutchman to the end, he also loved an England whose historic destiny has been (and perhaps still is) to save continental Europe from itself.

I am delighted and honoured to be able to represent him.”