

Jewish outrage as world's largest ship, named after SS war criminal, arrives in Europe

As Holocaust day nears, anger has erupted in the Netherlands and UK at arrival in Rotterdam of the Pieter Schelte. **Ed Vulliamy** reports

Leaders of Jewish communities and Holocaust memorial groups in Britain and the Netherlands have reacted with rage and despair at the arrival in Rotterdam of the world's biggest ship, the Pieter Schelte, named after a Dutch officer in the Waffen-SS.

The vice-president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, Jonathan Arkush, said: "Naming such a ship after an SS officer who was convicted of war crimes is an insult to the millions who suffered and died at the hands of the Nazis. We urge the ship's owners to reconsider and rename the ship after someone more appropriate."

Esther Voet, director of the Centre for Information and Documentation on Israel (Cidi), based in The Hague, said that the timing of the ship's arrival, shortly before Jews were targeted and killed in Paris and the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, was "a coincidence, I'm sure, but a sign of the times. We lost our battle to have the ship's name changed, and we are left eating dust."

Survivors of the Holocaust in Britain also spoke out. Ruth Barnett, a tireless campaigner who arrived from Nazi Germany as part of the Kindertransport, said: "I am outraged by the intensity and

'This homage by a wealthy son is an affront to the relatives of tens of millions of souls who perished'

John Donovan, author

extent of denial and indifference that fails to challenge things like this ship, and allows the impunity for perpetrators to think they can get away with it."

The London-based Lloyd's Register dug in to defend its role in the ship's building and development, while the shipbuilder said it had been named in honour of the owner's father for his "great achievements in the offshore oil and gas industry".

The definition of "world's largest ship" is disputed but the vessel is certainly the largest crane ship. It was built by the Swiss-based group Allseas, a pipelayer for the oil and gas industry. The ship weighs 403,342 gross tonnes, is more than 120 metres wide (the length of a football pitch) and 382 metres long.

THE CASE AGAINST PIETER SCHELTE

■ Before the Pieter Schelte was built, the Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies was compiling information on its namesake. Its main researcher, David Barnouw, said Schelte was "a member of a small fascist party before the war, but was in Venezuela when the Germans invaded. Schelte saw it as a reason to return".

■ Having joined the SS, "Schelte fought on the Russian front for the Wehrmacht, but was recalled to be part of the 'East Company', working for the SS in the occupied East. The job was to provide labour, and Schelte promised 2,000

Allseas is owned by a Dutchman, Edward Heerema, who is the son of Pieter Schelte Heerema. The ship bearing his father's name arrived in Rotterdam from the Korean Daewoo shipyards two days before the killing of four Jews at a kosher supermarket in Paris and three weeks before the Auschwitz anniversary.

Voet says: "We've fought this for 10 years, tried to persuade everyone involved that this was offensive. But no, we're left with this fact: the largest ship in the world is named after an officer in the SS, and not enough people are offended to get this changed."

She continued: "The only thing we can try to do now is persuade the authorities in Rotterdam not to accept it. But then it becomes an issue of jobs, and difficult. I only hope we keep the moral high ground."

On the coincidence of the ship's arrival with the killing in Paris and the Auschwitz anniversary, she added: "If they are insensitive enough to name a ship after a Nazi, they're not going to be sensitive enough to care about the anniversary of Auschwitz!"

Cidi cited a petition organised by a British-based website monitoring the affairs of Royal Dutch Shell, the energy group, which trumpeted the ship's arrival in Rotterdam and which Allseas confirms in a press release to be among its early clients. The site, Royaldutchshellplc.com, is run by John Donovan, a former Shell contractor who is completing a book on the history of the company's relations with the Third Reich. His petition reads: "Please change the ship's name so that it no longer sails under the name of a former Waffen-SS officer jailed for war crimes."

Donovan told the *Observer*: "This public homage by Edward Heerema as the wealthy son of a Nazi war criminal is an affront to the relatives of tens of millions of souls who perished at the hands of Nazi Germany."

Lloyd's Register, which has been closely involved in bringing the Pieter Schelte to launch and featured the ship in glowing terms on the cover of its magazine, stuck by its position. "It's not our role to take a view on the name of a single ship," said a spokesman, Mark Stokes.

Allseas refrained from comment, but its communications office sent "general information", including an interview with Edward Heerema in the *Telegraaf* newspaper, and a summary of his father's career. This stated that he "became a member of a national social-

■ As the war began to "go badly for Germany, he joined a resistance party, then went to Switzerland. He was interned after the war, tried and I think the judges found him one of their own – a good businessman, well educated".

■ Schelte returned to Venezuela where, says Barnouw, "any suggestions that he helped Nazis to escape to South America are untrue". But, he asks: "Why does his son, who is ... not a Nazi, give this ship a name that people will inevitably discuss?"

■ Among Schelte's remarks was his verdict that "the German race is model.



Pieter Schelte Heerema in his SS uniform. The ship bearing his name, above right, was built by Allseas, a Swiss-based oil and gas support group owned by his son. AFP/Getty



ist organisation in the early stages of the second world war. From November 1942 to June 1943 he was a director of a company under the SS."

It continues: "Heerema lost his sympathy for the Nazi regime, and defected in June 1943. At the end of the war he was arrested. His trial in 1946 led to conviction for the period of his detention awaiting trial."

After living in Venezuela, according to his official biography, Pieter Schelte Heerema returned to Holland in 1963, becoming "a civil engineer with great technical creativity, and an entrepreneur ... The choice of the [ship's] name Pieter Schelte is [his son] Edward's acknowledgement of his father's great achievements in the oil and gas industry."

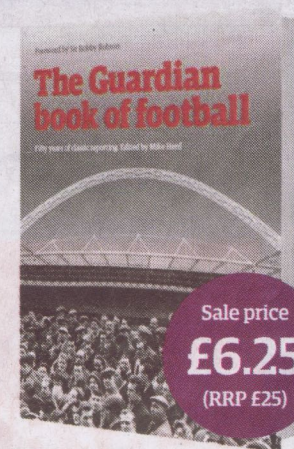
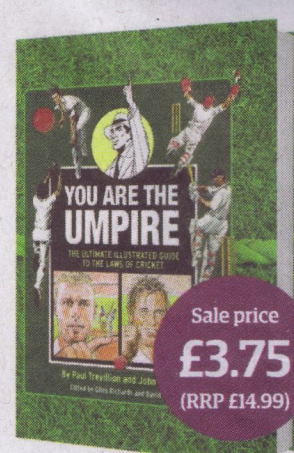
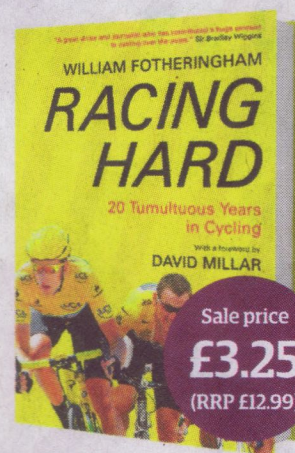
The *Telegraaf* article – headlined "Unparalleled Dutch glory" – said the vessel was "set to revolutionise the offshore world". Heerema tells the paper that his father "turned his back on the Netherlands in 1947. Which also was a way to break away from the past."

But Donovan has unearthed an extraordinary case in the high court in London last summer, brought after Allseas fell victim to a fraud scam.

The judge, Mr Justice Peter Smith, asked a witness about Pieter Schelte Heerema: "He was in the Dutch SS, was he?" "No, he was in the German SS," came the reply. Counsel then asked: "And then he left the SS, you say, in the middle of the war?" Whereupon the judge remarked: "I didn't know you could leave the SS. I thought it was a job for life."

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