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## NEWLY (RE)DISCOVERED TEXTS BY ETTY HILLESUM\*\*

### Abstract

The publication of *Het verzameld werk* (The collected works) of Etty Hillesum gives the impression that it contains all Hillesum's writings, i.e. diaries and letters, including letters written to her. This is not the case. The article offers an overview of writings that also originate from Hillesum's pen but have not become included in *Het verzameld werk* (2021, 7<sup>th</sup> edition). These texts concern letters, a series of citations and material related to psychochirology, the method of hand-reading Hillesum had been learning from Julius Spier. Studying this material provides additional, and sometimes interesting, new insights into Hillesum's life. It also opens up a new perspective for further Hillesum researches.

**Keywords:** Etty Hillesum, Hand-Analysis, Julius Spier, Writing

The anthology from a selection of the diaries of Etty Hillesum (1914-1943), known in English as *An Interrupted Life* (1983) and in Italian as *Diario 1941-1943* (1985), was compiled and published by Jan Geurt Gaarlandt<sup>1</sup>. Its very success encouraged Klaas A.D. Smelik to edit a critical edition of the diaries of the young, Dutch-Jewish woman's writings in full, complemented by letters from, to and about her. The project resulted in a single, richly annotated book in Dutch: *De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943* (*The Posthumous Writings of Etty Hillesum*, 1986), translated to Italian in two volumes as *Diario. Edizione integrale 1941-1942*, and *Lettere. Edizione integrale 1941-1943*<sup>2</sup>.

### 1. Letters

Due to the great interest in Hillesum's life and writings, over the years other fruits from her pen have been (re)discovered. "Re" between brackets, because some of these

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1 E. Hillesum, *Het verzameld werk: 1941-1943*, K.A.D. Smelik, (ed.), Balans, Amsterdam 2021 (7<sup>th</sup> revised edition). There is also a bilingual version consisting of two volumes: K.A.D. Smelik, M.G.S. Coetsier, (eds.), *Etty Hillesum: The Complete Works 1941-1943: Bilingual, Annotated and Unabridged*, Shaker Verlag, Maastricht 2014. For a list of all editions, and Hillesum studies up to date until 2021, see the Bibliography page on <https://www.cahiersettyhillesum.org> (last access 15-7-2025).

2 E. Hillesum, *Diario 1941-1942. Edizione integrale*, trad.it C. Passanti, Adelphi, Milano 2012. Ead., *Lettere 1941-1943. Edizione integrale*, trad.it C. Passanti, Adelphi, Milano 2013.

texts were at some point in the hands of Smelik and his team, but they had been set aside in a binder that was forgotten about over time<sup>3</sup>. An example: two of the re-surfaced documents concern letters, one from Hillesum to her hand-reading mentor and friend Julius Spier (1887-1942) dated March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1942, the other from Spier to Hillesum dated August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1941. Both letters are mentioned by Hillesum in her diaries, but perhaps the editor had not noticed this at the time, so they ended up in the “forgotten” binder. Nonetheless, the rediscovery of these two letters has led to the publication of two articles<sup>4</sup>.

Another example: seven newly discovered letters by Hillesum, and one rediscovered letter to her, have been included in new editions of *De nagelaten geschriften*, the seventh of which appeared in 2021 under the title *Het verzameld werk: 1941-1943* (*The collected works: 1941-1943*)<sup>5</sup>.

The most recent discovery involves a letter Hillesum wrote in May 1937 to a friend while on holiday in Belgium with her parents and brothers. Judith Koelemeijer traced it when doing research for her biography on Hillesum. Naturally, the biographer describes how the letter came about and places its content in context<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. Citations

Some other writings that emerged from Hillesum’s pen that did not make it into the “complete works” include a number of quotations Hillesum scribbled in a booklet entitled *Levenskunst* (*The art of living*). The editor knew of the booklet and its handwritten pages, but it seemed irrelevant to the project. Academic scrutiny into the copy of *Levenskunst*, which Hillesum once owned, has proven the opposite. The research brought to the fore that the handwritten quotations stem from Hillesum and

- 3 At the end of 2011, Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, the publisher, emptied out a desk and found a binder with papers related to the Etty Hillesum collected works project. He donated these papers to the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam, where most of the Hillesum material is archived. The documents mentioned in notes 3 and 11, and the letter by Annette van der Hof (1913-2000) in Hillesum, *Het verzameld werk*, cit., pp. 891-892, were among the ones kept in the binder.
- 4 A. Nagel, D. de Costa, ‘With you, I have my anchorage’: *Fifteen letters from Etty Hillesum to Julius Spier*, in K.A.D. Smelik, G. Van Oord, J. Wiersma, (eds.), *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writings, Life, and Influences of a Visionary Author*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2018, pp. 285-301 [only one of these fifteen letters was rediscovered]; A. Nagel, R. van den Brandt, ‘Three times yes and a thousand fold no!’: *Julius Spier writes to Etty Hillesum*, in K.A.D. Smelik, G. Van Oord, J. Wiersma, (eds.), *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context*, cit., pp. 303-312. These articles are translated into Italian: A. Nagel, *Etty Hillesum e Julius Spier: Nuova luce sulla loro relazione*, trad. it. di G. Van Oord, E. Paventi, Apeiron Editori, Sant’Oreste (Roma), 2025, pp. 35-46, 49-66.
- 5 E. Hillesum, *Het verzameld werk*, cit., pp. 877-885, 891-892; see K.A.D. Smelik, M.G.S. Coetsier, (eds.), *Etty Hillesum: The Complete Works 1941-194*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 1106-1120.
- 6 J. Koelemeijer, *Etty Hillesum, het verhaal van haar leven*, Balans, Amsterdam 2022, pp. 197-202. The complete letter, annotated, is also published in R. Tempelaars, K.A.D. Smelik, *Etty Hillesum schrijft een brief op het strand van Knokke*, in K.A.D. Smelik, (ed.), *Etty Hillesum over God en lot* (Cahiers Etty Hillesum 3), Gompel&Svacina, Antwerpen-’s-Hertogenbosch, 2023, pp. 153-161.

one other person, namely her “Spierclub” friend Henny Tideman (1907-1989). It is highly plausible that Tideman wrote her choice of quotes during the final months of 1942, after Spier’s passing. Under the heading “Many beautiful words” she gifted Hillesum the booklet on what would become Hillesum’s last birthday. Thus Hillesum may have penned her choice of quotes sometime in 1943<sup>7</sup>. Interestingly, Hillesum’s quotes reflect her reading of the *Bible* and Christian authors at the time, which includes authors she did not mention before. Ria van den Brandt has linked this recent reading to Hillesum’s ethic of love<sup>8</sup>. In other words, the citations lead to sources of influence that inspired Hillesum to consider finding empathy with her German oppressors.

### 3. “Psychochirological” material

There is still another kind of writings that the editor was aware of but decided not to include in the critical edition of 1986. This material relates to psychochirology, the Jungian inclined method of reading hands practiced by Julius Spier which he taught to his students.

Spier was a particularly important person in Hillesum’s life. His name appears on many pages in her diaries, usually abbreviated to “S.”. Spier had analysed Hillesum’s hands during the psychochirology course meeting on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1941. At least two, and possibly four, of his students had been present.

The outcome of the analysis had surprised Hillesum greatly, so she scheduled a private session. The day after the second private psychotherapeutic session, she started diary writing and soon after also began to attend Spier’s hand-reading lessons. From her notes it is clear that over the following months she became more important in Spier’s life: at first she became his “secretary” and friend, and from April to the end of June 1942 his closest collaborator and lover<sup>9</sup>. In her role as secretary, she prepared multiple hand-analysis reports of persons who had come as a subject-of-study to a course meeting, and did so also for people who had come to Spier for an individual hand-reading session. This latter category included the couple Pieter Starreveld (1911-1989) and Hanneke Starreveld née Stolte (1910-2002).

7 R. van den Brandt, P. Nissen, (eds.), *Veel mooie woorden: Etty Hillesum en haar boekje Levenskunst*, Verloren, Hilversum 2017.

8 R. van den Brandt, *Newly Discovered Sources of Etty Hillesum*, in K.A.D. Smelik, M.G.S. Coetsier, J. Wiersma, (eds.), *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, January 2014*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2017, pp. 299-313; Id., ‘Now is the Time to Put into Practice: Love Your Enemies’: Several Notes on Hillesum’s ‘Love for Enemies’ in *Levenskunst*, in K.A.D. Smelik, (ed.), *The Lasting Significance of Etty Hillesum’s Writings: Proceedings of the Third International Etty Hillesum Conference at Middelburg, September 2018*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2019, pp. 81-98.

9 A. Nagel, *Etty Hillesum, a Devoted Student of Julius Spier*, in K.A.D. Smelik, G. Van Oord, J. Wiersma, (eds.), *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context*, cit., pp. 273-284.

The Starrevelds had known Hillesum since 1937 and ran into her again around March 1942. Hillesum convinced them to have their hands analysed by Spier. She took notes during both sessions, which she incorporated into two separate reports<sup>10</sup>. Decades later, when the Starrevelds were contacted about the publication of Hillesum's writings, they told that after all those years they had kept these texts<sup>11</sup>. Although compiled by Hillesum, and mentioned by her in her diaries, the material is not included in *Het verzameld werk* having come out long after the Starrevelds' passing.

The same happened to the notes left of the "protocol" (the term Spier and his pupils used for the hand-reading reports) that Hillesum prepared of the hand-analysis of her friend Aimé van Santen (1917-1988) in January 1942. She wrote about it in her diaries. Although the letter which accompanied her report, snail-mailed to Van Santen, is included in the letter section of *Het verzameld werk*, the three rediscovered pages of the report are not<sup>12</sup>.

Overall, neither the editor of the collected works nor Hillesum scholars have paid in-depth attention to Hillesum's hand-reading activities. One can easily understand why. Hand-reading is considered a pseudoscience and has been traditionally smeared with a negative connotation, so scholars and laymen alike find it hard to look at the practice with an open mind<sup>13</sup>. For that reason, Spier, the hand-reader, has often been looked down upon, although he is credited for the good he did in Hillesum's life. For the same reason, paying attention to the hand-analysis reports of the Starrevelds and Van Santen was considered irrelevant. Still, my research into the (re)discovered psychochirological texts has yielded more than one interesting insight.

## 4. Background information to a particular collection of hand-analysis reports and handprints

My research into Hillesum's writings related to hand-reading began in 2007, when I wanted to know more about Julius Spier. I skimmed her diaries in search of data and tried to contact people who had known Spier personally. Many had already passed, like Adri Holm (1910-1970), who had fulfilled the role of secretary until Hillesum acquired that position in Spier's circle of friends.

10 E. Hillesum, *Het verzameld werk*, cit., pp. 354, 358, 367-368, 369, 764 n. 367; K.A.D. Smelik, M.G.S. Coetsier, (eds.), *Etty Hillesum: The Complete Works 1941-1943*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 543-544, 549-550, 563-565.

11 Nowadays just copies of the original reports remain, and the one of Pieter Starreveld is incomplete (Allard Pierson, Amsterdam, Collection Julius Spier).

12 E. Hillesum, *Het verzameld werk*, cit., pp. 245, 247, 589-592; K.A.D. Smelik, M.G.S. Coetsier, (eds.), *Etty Hillesum: The Complete Works 1941-1943*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 381-384, vol. 2, pp. 891-895; A. Nagel, *Aimé van Santen en het protocol met hindernissen*, in K.A.D. Smelik, (ed.), *Etty Hillesum en de receptie van haar dagboeken* (Cahiers Etty Hillesum 1), Gompel&Svacina, Oud-Turnhout-'s-Hertogenbosch 2020, pp. 83-99.

13 See A. Nagel, *Etty Hillesum, Julius Spier, and Psychochirology A Practice on the Border between Divination and Depth Psychology*, in «Ritual, Magic, and Witchcraft», 20, n. 2, 2025, pp. 254-279.

One of the persons I met with was Dicky van de Heuvel née de Jonge (1918-2021). In 1941, she was the youngest of the intimate group of students/friends around Spier; she was a “Spierclub” member just like Hillesum, Tideman and Holm. In view of my first visit, in January 2010, Van de Heuvel had retrieved a large plastic bag from the attic. This bag was filled with handprints and hand-analysis reports, most of which was prepared as part of the psychochirology lessons in 1941 and 1942.

To me the bag was a golden treasure, especially once I discovered it contained Hillesum’s handprints taken on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1941, and the report of that session<sup>14</sup>.

Another nugget involved the handprints of Spier himself and the accompanying report of the session in which he had been the students’ subject-of-study. The event had taken place on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1942, the same day that Hanneke Starreveld had her hands analysed. Hillesum’s diaries make no reference to the evening Spier’s hands were read, but she was most likely present, as she would not have wanted to miss such an event.

Several reports in the bag came in twofold, occasionally even threefold. Usually they are typed, and set in the German language. Not all reports are complemented by handprints, nor all handprints are complemented by a report. Generally, handwritten notes are scribbled close to the handprints. Characteristically for these texts are the cryptical abbreviations and specific psychochirological terminology; it turns them into difficult reading for palmistry laymen.

About seventy-five percent of the approximately sixty files carry a date. Most of the material is marked by an anonymized description of the subject-of-study: male/female, married/unmarried/divorced, and age. Only fifteen files either carry a name or have been otherwise identified. Hillesum’s file is marked *Mädchen, 27 J.* (girl [meaning “not married”], 27 years). This labelling, in combination with particular fragments in the report, made it possible to relate it to Hillesum.

Despite her advanced age, Van de Heuvel always had a clear mind and over the years she explained various issues related to the material. Many of the “double” reports were the result of a mistake. Around 1984 Tideman had sent a batch of her memorabilia to the editor and his team so they could use it in the annotation section of the critical edition. Van de Heuvel had done the same. Instead of returning Tideman’s material to Tideman, it was sent to Van de Heuvel. Upon the latter’s query of what to do, Tideman had responded that it was perfectly alright if Van de Heuvel would keep it with her own, which is exactly what Van de Heuvel had done.

14 A. Nagel, *Protocolen en vellen boterhampapier: Inventarisatie van een verzameling handanalyses uit de school van Julius Spier*, in K.A.D. Smelik, R. van den Brandt, M.G.S. Coetsier, (eds.), *Etty Hillesum in perspectief* (Etty Hillesum Studies 4), Academia Press, Gent 2012, pp. 61-75. A second version of Hillesum’s hand-analysis report, one with a different layout and without the handprints, has come to light in Gaarlandt’s binder (see note 4).

### 5. Several insights based on the collection of hand-analysis reports and handprints

My research into these papers has provided further insights. For example, close reading of Hillesum's hand-analysis report convinced me that the report could be considered the prologue to her diaries: several issues addressed by Spier during his first study of her hands, have become themes in her private notes<sup>15</sup>.

Notwithstanding the psychochirological terminology, the "protocols" regularly contain sentences that a layperson can understand. These fragments often reflect facts about or observations of the subject-of-study, or clearly formulate the interpretation of a certain hand characteristic. Always interesting are recorded fragments of conversation, in which Object (the name used for a subject-of-study) responded to a statement made about them. This renders the dry, at times enigmatic texts more lively. For example, the last paragraph of the report dated May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1942, about a 39-year-old bachelor who still lived with his mother, reads (translated): «After Object had left, there was a brief discussion about what kind of man he actually is: Terribly spoiled and infantile. "I'm the most balanced person" – only people who aren't, would say that»<sup>16</sup>. Obviously, the students had critically evaluated the man whose hands they had just studied.

The documents also show that a diverse group served as subjects-of-study. There were secretaries, teachers, nurses, housewives, bank employees, advertising artists, salesmen, general practitioners and the like; some were young, some middle-aged; Jewish and non-Jewish; single, married, engaged or divorced. The reports offer glimpses into private lives shaped by talents, health and family issues, childhood circumstances, and important life events. Together the reports suggest that the hand-analysis sessions led Spier's pupils to a kind of psychological understanding of anonymous persons. This statement can be illustrated by a few cases.

The handprint of a thirty-year-old unmarried man shows only his left hand; the right hand, so it turns out, was paralyzed. The man had initially worked as a lawyer but had then become a photographer and a toy designer. The report of a medical analyst, 35 years and single, reveals that she had lost her sister nine years earlier and her father three years earlier. Both events had affected her: it was visible in her hands. The report of a 49-year-old architect mentions that he had married late in life and that one of his ancestors had been a *Wunderrabbiner*. In the case of Frau Triezenberg, age 45, divorced, and a private teacher in French, the observations concerned many so-called "isolated squares" in a particular zone in the palm of her hands. These features were connected to childhood memories which burdened her. A remarkable mount in the palm was related to the "relationship with a man". How Spier and his students interpreted this mount precisely is not specified, while

15 A. Nagel, *Etty Hillesum's Hand-Analysis, the Prologue to her Diaries*, in K.A.D. Smelik, G. Van Oord, J. Wiersma, (eds.), *The Lasting Significance of Etty Hillesum's Writings*, cit., pp. 281-291.

16 The Collection Julius Spier is donated to the Allard Pierson, Amsterdam. All further citations from the hand-analysis reports stem from this collection, and are translated by me.

that kind of information could only be shared in private (*Merkwürdiger Venusberg. In der Beziehung zum Mann ... nun ja, das kann man nur unter vier Augen sagen*). Snippets like these tell us about a world that Hillesum and her fellow hand-reading friends were exposed to, but so far has gone unnoticed.

There is another aspect making the documents valuable. A handful of passages provide background information to passages in Hillesum's diary entries, like the one on Wednesday morning, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1942. Hillesum quoted a remark made to her by fellow students after the course meeting the evening before: «you were much too sharp and ironic with that subject; you shouldn't do that; it's not nice»<sup>17</sup>. The subject-of-study was a 27-year-old, unmarried secretary, who would have been better suited to her work as a paediatric nurse. The "mount of moon" on her left hand was "empty" which according to a note on the handprint, meant that much of what she did, or thought, was quite "unconscious". However, combined with other characteristics of the woman's hands, it did not mean that she lacked the ability for personal growth. The report is written in Dutch, which implies that Hillesum had not taken notes that evening.

Another report, preserved in twofold, one handwritten by Henny Tideman, the other handwritten by Dicky de Jonge, is dated April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1942, and also complements a phrase in Hillesum's diary. On the morning of April 22<sup>nd</sup>, Hillesum noted about that psychochirology lesson: «last night I behaved shamefully out of control by sitting in a corner reading»<sup>18</sup>. She explains to have felt overstimulated and therefore had isolated herself from the others. Physically, she had been present, mentally not. Both reports indirectly suggest that Hillesum had been the one to take notes of the session – a 21-year old young man, engaged and named Daan Smits<sup>19</sup> – but that Tideman and De Jonge had taken over as soon as she had resigned from the task.

Of the approximately sixty files only four are definitely written by Hillesum<sup>20</sup>. Several others were prepared by De Jonge, Holm, Tideman and possibly others, but contrary to the handwritten reports, it seems impossible to establish who wrote the typed ones. It is quite likely that Hillesum is the author of more than are currently known.

The first hand-analysis report Hillesum worked on, took her weeks to finish. At the same time, it is one of the most vivid accounts in the entire batch, as multiple sentences mirror the conversation that had taken place between Object and Spier.

17 E. Hillesum, *Het verzameld werk*, cit., p. 238; K.A.D. Smelik, M.G.S. Coetsier, (eds.), *Etty Hillesum: The Complete Works 1941-1943*, cit., vol. 1, p. 371 (my translation). Ivi, vol. 1, p. 372: «I've been being much too caustic and sarcastic towards the subject, that it isn't nice and I mustn't do it».

18 E. Hillesum, *Het verzameld werk*, cit., p. 351; K.A.D. Smelik, M.G.S. Coetsier, (eds.), *Etty Hillesum: The Complete Works 1941-1943*, cit., vol. 1, p. 539 (my translation). Ivi, vol. 1, p. 540: «last night I acted with shameless lack of consideration, just sitting in the corner and reading».

19 Although the subject-of-study has a name, Daan Smits, his whereabouts are not yet traced.

20 These hand-analysis reports are dated September 24<sup>th</sup> (Alfred Kropveld, married, 28 years), October 15<sup>th</sup> (woman, unmarried, 40 years), November 3<sup>rd</sup> (woman, married, 43 years), and November 17<sup>th</sup> (man, married, 36 years), 1941. Hillesum possibly also wrote the reports dated November 10<sup>th</sup> (Jetje Tideman (1918-2016), a niece of Henny Tideman) and November 24<sup>th</sup> (man, married, 36 years), 1941, and January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1942 (man, unmarried, 30 years).

In her diaries Hillesum describes the man as «the unhappy potential schizoid with the “unholy father-complex”» (September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1941), and once she drops his last name: «[the notes of] that Kropveld really need to be worked out» (October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1941)<sup>21</sup>.

Thanks to the preserved handprints and report, it is now known who the man was: a Jew from Amsterdam and general practitioner Alfred Kropveld (1913-1942), son of the well-known general practitioner Aron Izak Kropveld (1881-1932)<sup>22</sup>. Although Hillesum considered Kropveld jr., in Dutch, a *schizophreen* (schizoid), she did not use that term in the hand-analysis report. After researching Kropveld jr., my guess is that Hillesum projected her own fear of «suspected schizophrenia» (October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1942) onto the young doctor<sup>23</sup>.

## 6. Final thoughts

From the above, it will be obvious that the (unconscious) notion that what remains of Etty Hillesum's writings encompasses more than what is contained in the critical edition. Those who study Hillesum may be interested in the newly (re)discovered writings, as they may shed a different light on her thoughts and whereabouts. As for the “psychochirological” material, there is still a way of research to go. To date, no one has systematically studied the hand-analysis records and considered how the weekly course meetings with Spier may have influenced Hillesum's view of people as individuals with strengths and weaknesses, as personalities with potential, a past, a present, and a probable future. Perhaps what she learned, or picked up on through the hand-analysis sessions, somehow connects with, as Ria van den Brandt put it, Hillesum's “love for enemies”. Furthermore, if Hillesum's exposure to and experience with psychochirology is more profound than is currently understood, Spier's influence on her personal growth may have been more profound than has been assumed until now.

21 E. Hillesum, *Het verzameld werk*, cit., p. 115, 120; K.A.D. Smelik, M.G.S. Coetsier, (eds.), *Etty Hillesum: The Complete Works 1941-1943*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 175 and 183 (my translation). See *ivi*, vol. 1: «Potential schizoid that I am with an ‘unholy father-complex’» (p. 176); «and that Kropveld case history really has to be typed out» (p. 184).

22 A. Nagel, *Aron Izak Kropveld (1881-1932), huisarts in Amsterdam en pleitbezorger van rein leven*, in B. Van Hee, C. van Tilburg (eds.), *Heel-meesters: Befaamde artsen en figuren uit de geschiedenis van de geneeskunde*, Garant, Antwerpen 2014, pp. 63-72.

23 A. Nagel, *Etty Hillesums “beestachtig interessante object”, Alfred Kropveld*, in K.A.D. Smelik, (ed.), *Etty Hillesum en haar zoektocht in oorlogstijd* (Cahiers Etty Hillesum 2), Gompel&Svacina, Oud-Turnhout-'s-Hertogenbosch 2021, pp. 177-188, p. 183.

*Illustrations:*

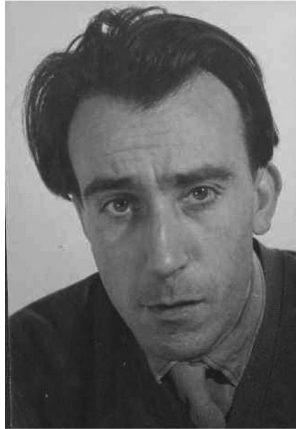


Photo 1. Photo of Aimé van Santen, 1938 (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, Collection Aimé van Santen, ARCH01931.



Photo 2. Handprint of the left hand of Aimé van Santen (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, Collection Aimé van Santen, ARCH01931 file 36).

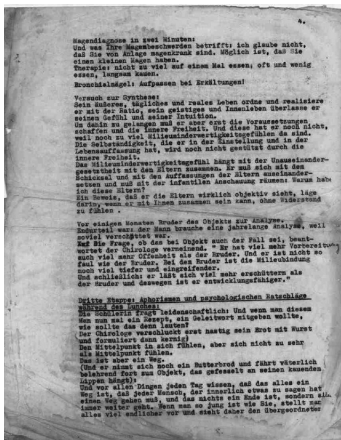
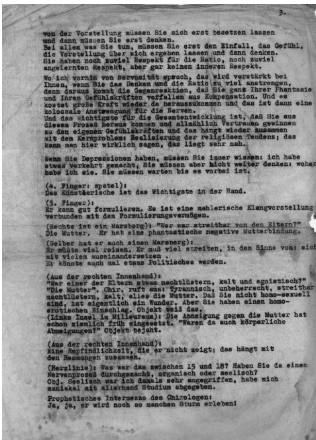
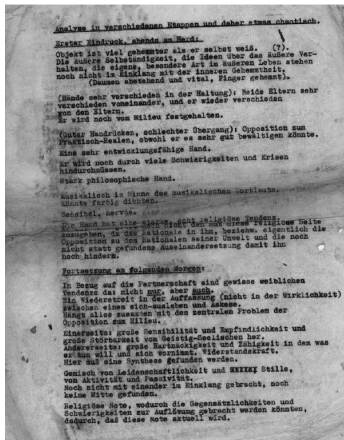


Photo 3. The three rediscovered pages of the hand-analysis report of Aimé van Santen, written by Etty Hillesum (Jewish Museum, Amsterdam, D015174).