My Story

1940 - 1945

Thea Coleman-Tietroy

CHRISTMAS 1939.

Quietly we followed one another into Opa's garden. It was early morning and still dark. The ground was covered in snow, which crunched under foot. Our breath was visible in the moonlight, while the shadows moved forward in a single file. Aunt Elisabeth turned around and put her finger on her lips to indicate that the girls should not spoil the surprise with their giggles.

The surprise was for Opa. All his children and grandchildren had come together to celebrate Christmas in Bergen, a little village north of Amsterdam. We stopped under his bedroom. My father stooped to dig for a stone and threw it against the window. We held our breath. A light switched on....All was going according to plan. We sang Silent Night, a beautiful arrangement for four voices, which sounded as pure as the clear frosty night. We were a musical family, singing and playing instruments were part of our upbringing. And there stood Opa looking down, the window wide open. He was surprised and moved. I noticed that he wiped his eyes with his handkerchief.

Opa fascinated me. He was awesome, with silver- grey hair. His bright blue eyes penetrated your soul. Though he had been a very strict father to his eight children, to his grandchildren he was definitely a lot milder. He kept us spellbound for hours with his stories. We were always delighted when we went to visit him.

This Christmas morning, after breakfast, we all went to church. Very upright, with his silver-knobbed walking-stick Opa led his family to his pew at the front. The church was in candle light and the aroma of the pine branches hanging all around was gorgeous. The minister talked about the dark days to come. I found that strange, because the days should be getting longer! The singing sounded better and louder than ever before! I remember the evening very well, twenty of us around the table was quite an occasion! Our eyes wandered towards the Christmas tree. It was fixed in a musical box, turning around playing carols. Underneath the tree we noticed a few parcels, wrapped in red paper, which was unusual. Normally presents were not given at Christmas. They were books for the children. The adults were talking very seriously. Now and then we heard the words, Austria, Poland and Hitler. We were soon to know what it was all about. It turned out to be the last Christmas together.

It had not been an easy life for my parents as they, like everybody else, were slowly building up their future again after the depression. Ten years after my brother Wim and my sister Willy, I was a planned baby and at my birth in 1933 I was given the name Theodora, Gift of God, which says enough. The greatest step forward, however, was to move to a new house in this recently developed area of The Hague, the Zuider park. The outside stone stairwell led to the front door of our two storey home. From the balcony at the front we overlooked a magnificent park as far as the eye could see.

I loved it all. We now had our own bedrooms, which pleased Wim and Willy. Soon they had to sit their finals for school and they needed peace for studying. They were allowed to put a lock on their door to keep me out. Rightly so, because their marbles and roller-skates were not safe! With Wim and Willy, and my parents, it was as if I had two fathers and two mothers.

I was delighted when in 1939 my younger brother Hans arrived, together with a washing machine. Both were equally admired and intensely enjoyed! I had now a living doll to play with and he was mine.

My father was strict, too strict maybe. He believed in a spartan approach. We had to finish our shower with the cold tap, which spoiled the bath fun. Good for your heart, he would say. He insisted that his children learned to swim as young as possible. He was not a very strong swimmer himself, though he rescued a boy from drowning when he was in his teens. With so many ditches around where we lived now, it was essential. As soon as I started school, Wim and Willy had to take it in turns to take me to the open-air swimming pool in the park, before breakfast. I remember Erica, a fat lady with cropped ginger hair, who kindly rubbed my purple body dry after the lesson. I made sure it did not take me long to acquire the skill of swimming!

Piano lessons were next. The teacher, Bep, did not allow you to touch the instrument until you knew all the notes on the music-sheet and the corresponding keys on the piano. Finger exercises had to be done daily too. Finally I could open the lid and play. Practice time was early in the morning. Invariably my father would get out of bed when he heard my inability to count. Every time I made a mistake he would say: "Again, from the beginning!"

It always ended in tears. My mother often felt sorry for me, but I made progress. My father would also praise me:" Well done, Sunbeam!" Willy had piano lessons too, but she did not like it when the time came I surpassed her. Wim played the harmonium, until my mother discovered that the tutor played Wim's set pieces, while telling each other jokes. The lessons were stopped and Wim was quite happy with this.

I liked going to school. It was a long walk, but sometimes I could hitch a lift in the morning on the back of Wim or Willy's bike or my father's crossbar. We had two hours for lunch and all pupils had to go home, rain or shine. Wednesday afternoons were free, because of school on Saturday morning, which was still a normal part of the working week for everybody.

I spent a lovely time with Hans, or I played outside with the numerous neighbourhood kids. We got on very well together on the whole. On one occasion I had taken Willy's bag of marbles and lost them all in a game. I was very upset when they refused to return them. Fair is fair, but I was not looking forward to Willy's anger.

The Sundays were special. Church in the morning and long walks in the afternoon, either to the park or the city. The information given by my parents encouraged our interests, even to this day.

The weekend finished on Sunday night with a serial story, told by my father. His own made-up tale and he had the knack of stopping at the crucial point that made it hard to wait till the next episode.

The winter time was great when it started to freeze. As soon as the ice was strong enough the skates came out. Young and old were on their way. I learned behind a little chair or between adults, if they were willing to help.

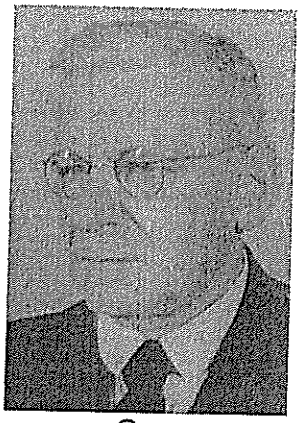
On December 5th, it was the birthday of St. Nicholas. Some evenings before I had put my shoe on the hearth and sang a special Sinterklaas song up the chimney, hoping that when he rode his white horse over the roof tops, he would reward me with a sweet. Sometimes he didn't! One year, on the 5th, we took our places around an enormous crate in the front room. I was quite nervous, especially when the lid slowly opened and I saw Black Piet's face appear. He is St. Nicholas's helper. After all the poems were read and the presents received, Piet left. I was really sorry that Wim had missed all this. I had not even recognised him as Black Piet!

The long school holidays were a problem as most people had only one week off a year. Very few ever travelled abroad. For us, there were family visits. On rare occasions we would go by train and the destination was usually Bergen, to enjoy the woods, sand dunes and the sea. We would stay on after my parents went back home.

Opa and Aunt Elisabeth lived about a hundred metres away from each other. Uncle Arie was in the Merchant Navy and often away for very long periods. Their children were about the same age as us, so it was fun to spend time with them. I found Aunt Elisabeth much stricter than my mother! Well, she had to be, I suppose. There were so many exciting things to do. We particularly loved a journey with "Bello", an old steam-train. We would hang out of the window and enjoy the smell of the puffs of steam-clouds drifting along, while the sharp whistle announced our arrival at the sea-side.

Opa would always come along on walks to the woods, encouraging us to collect fir-cones for his fire. How can we ever forget the buckets of green beans we sat stringing in the garden! Hoarding food had been forbidden recently, but everybody still bottled, salted and stored as before, just in case.

During the evenings we made music. One uncle, who still lived at home with Opa, was an accomplished pianist. The others all played a different instrument. We younger ones listened or sang. It was a super way to finish the days. It was at the end of this summer holiday, in 1939, that the idea was discussed for all the family to meet at Christmas.



Opa

PROLOGUE OF THE WAR.

What I could not have known then as a seven-year old that, although I lived in a wealthy country, changes were afoot.

At this point I need to explain that my personal memories in this chapter have been supplemented by knowledge of the facts at an older age. We often had lengthy discussions about this period, at home and at school, long after the war was over, details of which should not be lost with time.

With the Depression years gone and with the wealthy possessions of our colonies in the Far East and the West-Indies you would have thought Holland had little to worry about – but no. The world-stage was politically in turmoil. Drastic measures had to be taken to economise. Insecurity and the disaster of unemployment made people tense and nervous. Especially my father, who had experience of it during the Depression years and had to work very hard now for long hours to keep his present job as an accountant.

No wonder I never got a scooter with proper tyres I so dearly wished for!
With no pension or benefits in those days, we had to save as much as possible for that famous "rainy day".

A great concern was the growth of the NSB, the National Socialists. With anxiety the development in Germany was being witnessed. Adolf Hitler, the leader of the National Socialists, had come to power in 1933 and since then there was a strong military build-up, as well as persecution of Jews. One could see, even then, which direction Germany meant to go.

During the First World War, Holland had been neutral but many doubted that this time it could be the same. It was desperately trying to avoid annoying the strong, states, Germany, Italy and Japan. At all costs, Holland wanted to prevent its people from being subjected to the cruel brutalities of war. When England and France declared war on 3rd September 1939, Holland proclaimed neutrality and Germany seemed to agree.

Germany, with its numerous kingdoms and dukedoms, provided many partners for royal suitors all over Europe. Wilhelmina, our Queen, had married Prince Hendrik in 1901 and in 1937 Juliana, the Crown Princess, also married a German, Prince Bernhard. Under the circumstances, he had to adjust quickly to the Dutch way of life.

When a state of emergency was declared on November 7th, our Queen paid a visit to King Leopold of Belgium, whose country was also neutral, to discuss the situation. They sent messages to all countries concerned to offer mediation. The Dutch have always been a sea-faring nation, so when our ships ran into mines and sank and the borders were violated by aircraft, a complaint was lodged. Goebbels dismissed these incidents as "unfortunate errors".

When Berlin reacted unfavourably to a complaint of yet another border incident, the Prime Minister cancelled all leave to protect the borders and to flood strategic areas of low-lying land, which would hamper the German infantry.

However, this proved an old-fashioned idea of defence, when you consider the use of German aircrafts.

The N.S.B. inside Holland now gave greater concern. Everybody knew that our country was full of German spies and of Dutch people who were pro-German. They presented a positive danger. During April 1940 the Germans insinuated, for the first time, a possible assault by the Allies in Holland and Belgium with the aim of attacking Germany.

A radio-news broadcast was never missed. Also the English and German ones were closely followed. I was not even allowed to whisper. Family discussions were held afterwards. The word "war" frightened me and, though I did not know what it entailed, I kept on asking if we were going to have one.

In the meantime trenches were dug across the road from us. How futile that was became clear on that fatal early morning of 10th of May 1940. It was a most beautiful sunny start of the day. We were roused by a steady drone, occasionally interrupted with a diving noise that would become so familiar during the following years. We stood, stunned and pale, clinging to each other on the balcony. The sky was black with German fighter planes, dropping hundreds of parachutists into position. It was like a flock of birds disturbed by a gunshot. Never in my life had I seen anything like this. It was incredible! It was the distress on my parents' faces that made me control my excitement.

The war had started! Without warning Holland had been invaded! The radio gave out bulletins on the situation. Civilian airports and military bases were being bombed. The bridges over the big rivers were blown up to obstruct the Germans. The Germans, in Dutch uniforms, were unmasked and executed. They had to say the word "Scheveningen", and if they couldn't, you knew they were Germans in disguise.

It had only been a few weeks ago since the Prime-Minister had asked the population to stay calm, like Chamberlain waving his piece of paper in Britain, some months before. The N.S.B. correspondent, Max Blokzijl, the biggest traitor of all, reassured the Dutch that from 'German authorities source' there was not the slightest reason to suspect a hostile attitude from Germany.

The German Consul asked for an audience with the Minister of the Foreign Office three hours after the attack. He confirmed the invasion and advised that resistance was pointless. Providing that no opposition was given, Germany would guarantee our possessions overseas as well as our dynasty; otherwise the risk of total destruction was imminent. Our Minister was so enraged about this unannounced attack that he informed the Consul to consider us at war.

I was very scared when I heard planes flying over and jumped on my mother's lap clinging on for comfort. My parents were doing their best not to panic and made a game out of covering the windows with tape, some quite artistically, to prevent them shattering in the bombardments. The black-out did not help me with my fear of the dark either. Hans, now eight months old, had my full attention while the news was on.

The soldiers fought hard and were brave to try and oppose such an enormous army, but it was useless to even contemplate a dent into this iron force. The few blown-up trains with tanks certainly did not weaken the German strength and 79 planes shot down sounds a great number but, compared with the number in action, it was nothing. In one of those planes shot down near The Hague was the German general Von Sponeck. It also contained a saddled horse on which he had hoped to enter The Hague, heading his victorious army, as well as a complete plan of action. The Queen and her Government had to be arrested immediately and to be sent to Berlin.

Everywhere heavy fighting went on, especially along the Rhine to keep the enemy from crossing the river with their heavy armour. Many lives were lost.

At the Palace, in Soestdijk, Prince Bernhard stood armed among the Dutch soldiers facing his own country-men, for which he gained the deepest respect of the population. He and Princess Juliana with their two daughters were picked up by a British destroyer on May 12th. The Queen boarded a British warship and headed for the, as yet unoccupied, province of Zeeland. When it became known that the enemy knew, the course was changed for Britain. The Government sailed that same evening, destination London.

By now most of the country seemed open for the German troops. An un-signed ultimatum was presented to the Dutch commander in charge of the Rotterdam defence on May 14th, saying, that in two hours the Germans expected the resistance to cease, or else... The Dutch commander sent the letter back, requesting the signature, rank and unit of the sender. Though Rotterdam had already capitulated, the German bombers destroyed its entire centre, even before the two hours were up!

The whole of Holland had to capitulate; otherwise all the big cities would have to share Rotterdam's fate. This was it! At six p.m. on May 14th the Dutch surrendered. The war had lasted for exactly five days!

When the German troops entered Amsterdam and The Hague on May 16th the true Dutch watched in silence and with sombre faces, the N.S.B. cheered and presented the troops with flowers and sweets and Rotterdam was still burning. We could see it from the upstairs window, where we watched it with tears running down our cheeks. So many innocent people were burnt alive. The destruction of the heart of commerce. The cranes in the harbour collapsed, like our hope.

To see so many adults cry everywhere had a bewildering effect on me. Why? What was happening?

The newly elected State Commissioner, Seys Inquart, declared that the Germans had not arrived as conquerors and would not dream of taking away the freedom of the Dutch, nor impose the German doctrine. He had the audacity to say this in the Ridderzaal, where our Queen opened the new sessions of Parliament every year. Even Hitler commented on the "honest fighting of the Dutch soldiers and because no civilians took part, I might consider to free your P.O.W's."

Our P.M. in London sent a message to the Dutch nation that "it was a duty to work together with the Germans as well as possible." This was considered as so obviously pro-German that he was immediately replaced by Professor Gerbrandy, Cherry-Brandy, as Churchill liked to call him.

One of the police departments, now all under German control, announced in June that one million kg. of potatoes had to be sent to Germany. This was the immediate beginning of the looting of our enormous amounts of stocked food, shoes and clothing. It was a pity that the population did not have a chance to acquire it before it all went to Germany, but a most accurate inventory was already in their hands. The Germans paid for it all by patiently printing Dutch money in unbelievable quantities.

From the beginning there had always been hope that the British would come to our aid, but no sign of them—as yet. Daily, heavy German bombers were flying west, whilst the German soldiers marched through the streets, singing about their next move, England. To support this financially, collections were held, which they called winter help. Fluorescent badges like little houses were given in return, which appealed too many, especially us children. To my disappointment I never got one.

The BBC news was followed intently and we heard about the Battle of Britain. The Germans were not very pleased with this outcome and it must have cut to the core when they marched and sang, "Und wir fahren gegen England", with passers-by adding "splash-splash, glug-glug" under their breath!

After the Battle of Britain the glug-glug bit was also used as an end-piece at dance parties. Consequently all dancing was forbidden.

Rotterdam
The day after the bombing

LIFE GOES ON. 1940-1942

At school we held regular drills when the air-raid siren sounded and we had to dive underneath our desks. To start with it was chaos and we found it hilarious. The headmaster had to come in and bash his cane on the desk in order to make him-self heard. Soon he convinced us of the seriousness of the exercise and after that we were as meek as lambs.

The summer holiday started well. I was so happy that I could go up to the next class in September, but two of my classmates had to stay behind and do that year again, which was a pity.

Wim had finished his schooling and, at nearly 18 could be called up for military service at any time. This was a great worry, of course. Willy was facing her final year, come September. She did nothing but revise even during the holidays and I had to keep well out of her way.

The Germans were very anti-British. Only their version of events was the right one, therefore they objected to people listening to the BBC and ordered that all radios should be handed in. Nobody did, or at least not immediately. A bit more time for me to listen to the children's choir of Jacob Hamel!

Wim and Willy had taught me an English love song "I love you, yes I do", and also "God save the King", but they strongly urged me not to sing these outside. A great shame, because I wanted to brag.

I was warned about our neighbours, who belonged to the NSB. Their balcony was next to ours. At least, they were easily recognisable in their uniforms when they stood there showing off. You can imagine my mother's horror when she caught me singing a skit about the NSB on the balcony, as loudly as I could. "On the corner of the street stands an organ grinder. Not a man, nor a woman, but a traitor!" She pulled me back by my hair and thus I found out about dangers of many kinds.

So strong were the feelings against the NSB that you would not even dream of wearing a black skirt with a red jumper, their colours! An alarming number of the Dutch became members of the NSB, convinced they would benefit from being on the winning side. However, once they belonged it was impossible for them to leave. They proudly wore their badges on the lapels and their children were given lots of fun at the Party clubs. To prove to be a worthy member they were expected to pass on messages and information to the authorities, which created mistrust from the outset.

I received, yet again, a warning from my parents to avoid them as much as possible. I did not mind, because only very few members with children lived near us. Little by little restrictions were imposed. To organise the housekeeping was a nightmare for everyone with the shortages, queuing and coupons. Sugar had already been rationed in 1939, which was hard on us as my father drank sugar with tea, instead of the other way around!

By 1942 everything was on coupons, even vegetables. Food-hoarding was forbidden, but many an evening we were all involved in bottling whatever we could get hold of. The washing up was usually left to me and all was done in good spirits,

singing away together. We were so pleased when the preserved vegetables, meat and my favourite, apple-sauce, could be hidden away.

During the autumn my father started to bring home apples he managed, again, to obtain via connections with his firm. Eventually there were so many that a cupboard was emptied and planks fixed at the front. It filled up quite nicely and the odd one I pinched was not missed. They were delicious!

No eggs. Pigs and chickens had already been slaughtered before the war to keep the grain for bread-making. Fortunately we only ate meat on Sundays as a rule. The choice was very limited. It was either horse-meat, often served with red cabbage, or veal and was both very scarce. Calves were killed to prevent them drinking the precious cow's milk.

There was still a choice left what to have on your first slice of bread, the subsequent ones were with 'contentment', that meant with nothing. We did not complain much and ate what was given. That is, except my white pet rabbit.

It was destined for the Christmas dinner! I howled and objected furiously and fled upstairs. Even to this day, I can see its skinned body on the kitchen table when I happened to come down a bit too soon. Nobody could eat it...

In the park, across the road, a large area had been turned into allotments for schoolchildren. Wim already had a plot a year or two and now managed to get me one also. It was run by professional gardeners and nothing less than perfect was acceptable. It was a yearly job for all of us to prepare the site. First we had to tread paths over the whole area and then divide it into beds, which were measured exactly to the cm. into the same sizes. The vegetables had to be grown like a regiment in straight lines. Rain or shine, we had to attend and it was hard work, but who cared when you brought the proceeds home, for free, and you saw the relief on your mother's face. To her it was an answer to a prayer. Our potatoes, in particular, were very good, much better than the poor quality in the shops, if available of course.

The evening meal was discussion time as well as for explanations. The newly issued stamps had to be stuck more to the left on the envelope to leave a space for the imaginary stamp of our Queen's head. We never forgot to do this.

There would be no more museum visits, because paintings, if not looted, were hidden. (In the sand-dunes, but re-appeared after the war none the worse for wear). However, the children's museum was still open but for limited hours.

Church bells did not ring out anymore. Some were successfully hidden, but a great number had already been seized by the Germans. A deal was struck that, if the bells could not get through the door, they could stay in their position as long as they were not rung. Miraculously one or two doors narrowed overnight!

All along the West coast a heavily armed and mined defence line, two miles wide, was being built. It was out of bounds for civilians. Somewhere we still have a clandestine photograph of the pier of Scheveningen on fire. The story was that the Germans thought that it was a bridge to England. Whatever the reason, the sea-side trips were over for everybody. The people who lived within this zone had to vacate their house and move further inland. Most families had to double up with strangers and store their furniture or leave it behind.

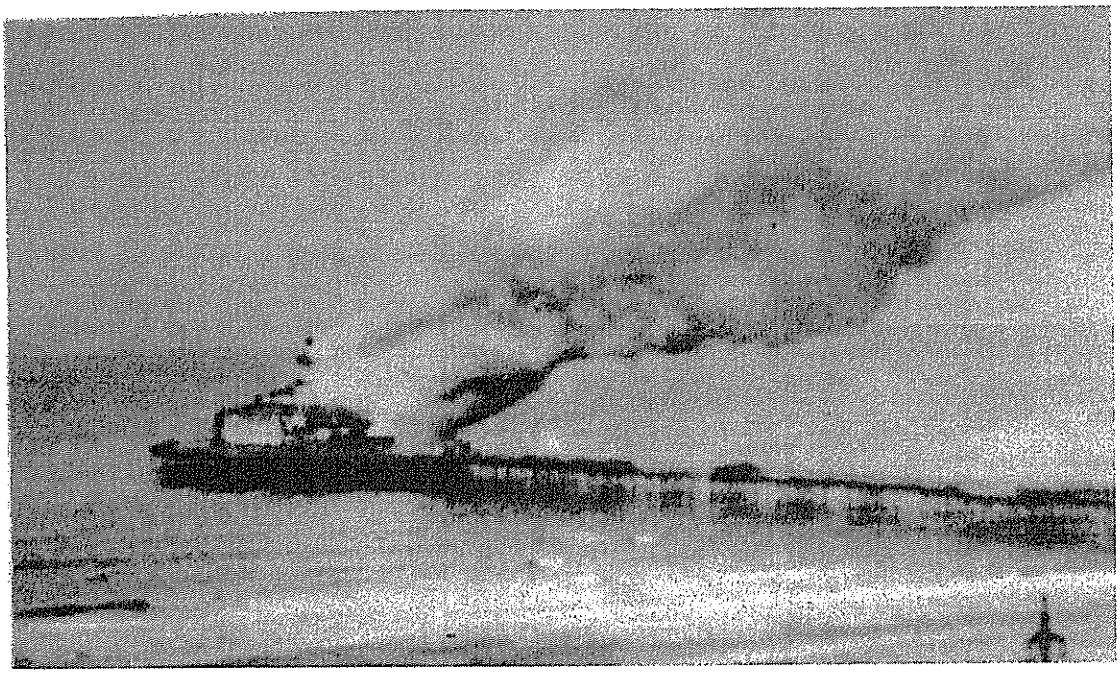
- We received a telegram both from Opa and Aunt Elisabeth asking for help and advice. We did not have a telephone in those days. My father went there immediately and must have been of great help. Opa found a detached house, about 20 miles further north, in Heilo. Aunt Elisabeth was just as lucky to find a big empty house, a few miles outside Amsterdam along a lonely road amongst scattered farms and several windmills.

At last they could move with the furniture to their new house. As for us, we would miss the long walks in the dunes, the swimming in the sea and the fun on the beach. Teenagers may sometimes cause problems.

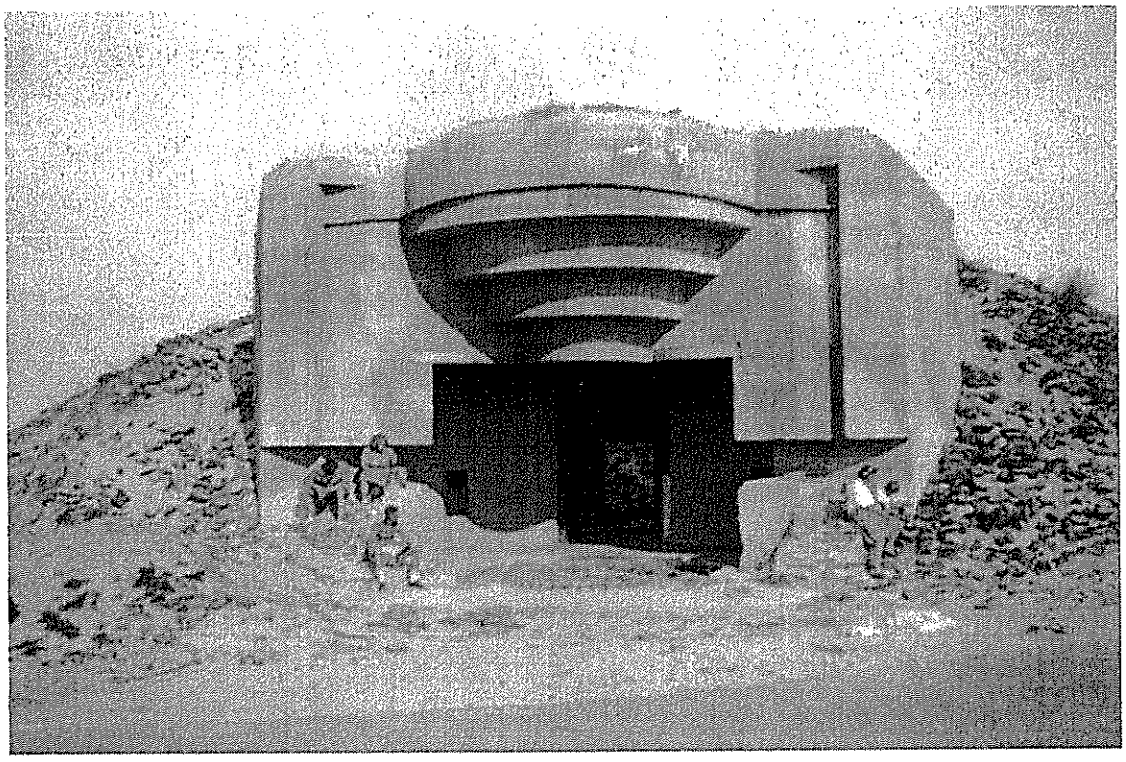
One evening Willy dropped a bomb-shell whilst we were having dinner. "Do you know that I don't need your permission anymore if I decide to marry a German soldier, now I am over 16 years of age? I hear it is a new law." My father went berserk! Normally the age of consent was 31. I am sure she did it to annoy. She always liked to challenge, especially my father.

One morning a letter was delivered for Wim. Indeed, the call up papers had arrived for the Arbeits Einsatz, a work force for Germany. My parents were naturally upset, but there was nothing one could do about it. A few weeks later he arrived home in his uniform. It was a faded green. I liked his jodhpurs with bandages up to his knees, but most of all his peak-cap with yellow and green tassel. I tried it on and saluted the mirror. He was also issued with a spade, which I thought was funny for a 'soldier". He was on a short leave before he had to return to his unit and go to Germany.

My mother and I took him to the tram. Tearfully we waved as the tram screeched around the corner. "I'll be back soon," he shouted. It would be years before we met again.



Scheveningen – The Pier on fire



Bunkers – Coastal defence

This was also a premature end to his recent employment at the Ministry of Public Works.

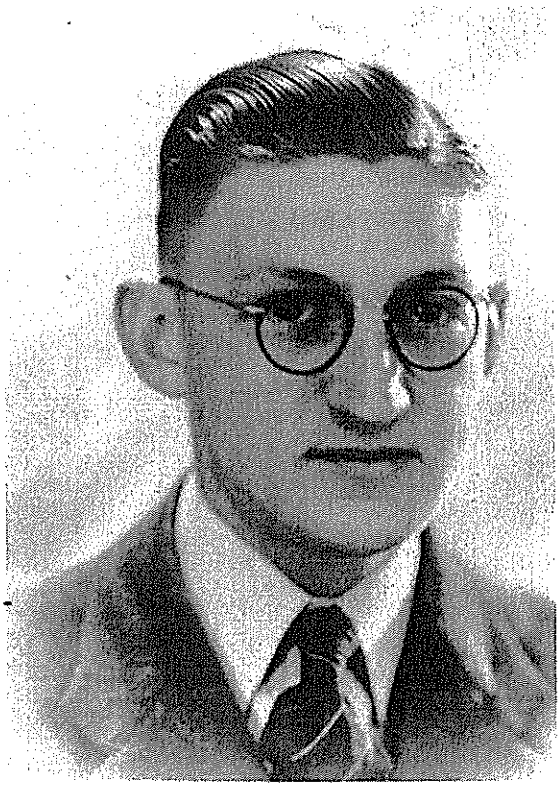
It was in 1942 when Willy passed her finals for the Grammar school and was immediately employed by Van Leer's Vatenfabrieken, once a Jewish firm, but now under German control. She was promoted quickly to the technical department, which she enjoyed. Her dearest wish would have been to study engineering, but universities were closing.

She had less time for me and also with Wim gone, my position in the family greatly improved. The whole of our house was at my disposal without restrictions. I could be my happy-go-lucky self. Life was more or less normal. The occupation did not affect us children too much, apart from the shortages and the presence of soldiers.

1942 was the year with many changes afoot of which I was blissfully unaware. Through his firm, my father met Mr. Sanders, a Jew, who helped other Jews flee via an escape-route to Switzerland and Spain. He had also set up-an organisation that took care of Jews who had already gone into hiding in Holland. Dr. V, also a member, persuaded my father to join this resistance movement, soon followed by Willy and Jan and Lien Marijnis, the couple in the top flat. He was in the police force. My mother was not to know anything about all this. One day on my way to school; I saw a flurry of activity. Men were busy pinning up a notice, 'Forbidden for Jews', on the park entrance, the benches, the tram, the swimming pool and even on the door of the hairdresser's. Everywhere! Some shops were being boarded up. People stopped to watch and I wondered what they were whispering about together.

The persecution of Jews was in full swing and all of them were ordered to wear the Star of David, my mother explained. Not everybody did of course, despite the promise of 'protection'. A small number of pupils in our school left. Teachers and professors were being sacked and when the students rebelled, the universities were closed. They could either all hide, or be sent to Germany to work in the factories.

How easily one could get involved. One evening we received a visit from a lovely couple with their three sons. They were Jews. Their house and the contents had been confiscated by the S.S. They were fortunate to have escaped arrest, because they happened to be elsewhere at that time. The father was short and well built with a kind face, the mother was a bit taller and very elegant. I was sent upstairs, bursting to know what it was about. When they eventually left, the eldest, who was my age stayed behind.



Wim about to be called up

Willy having passed her finals

I was so excited to hear that Fred was coming to live with us. He had lovely short, wavy black hair and his mother's dark-grey eyes.

I had it all worked out. He could go to my school and we would walk there together. He could have my bed as long as I got Wim's! At the time, understandably, I totally overlooked the fact that here stood a young boy giving a shy impression, but who was in reality very unsure of himself. To be separated from his parents, knowing his situation and to have to live with strangers could not have been easy. Besides, he was given a new surname and had to be very careful not to slip up.

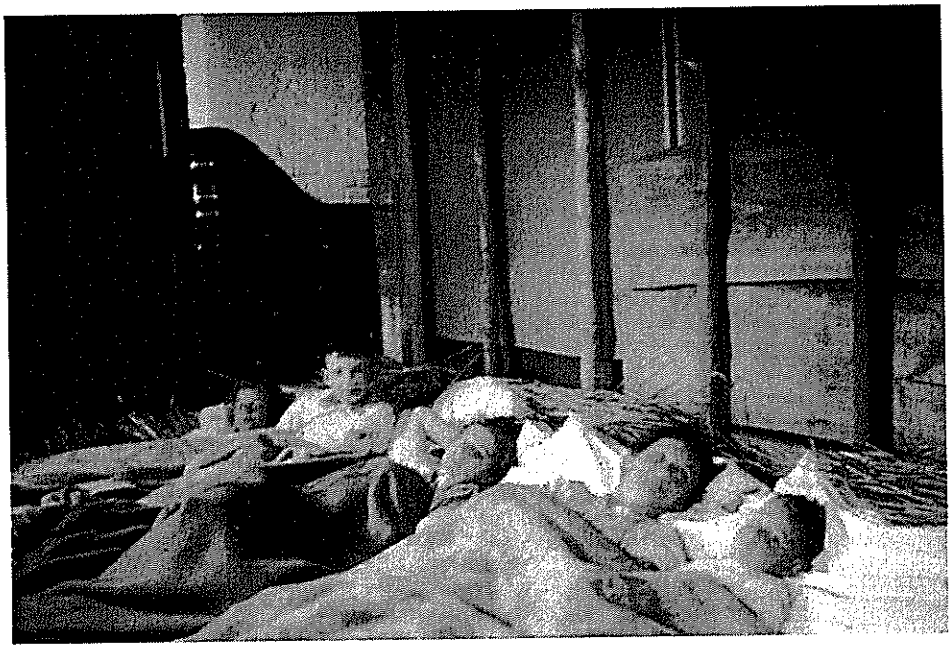
He felt so much happier when he was told that John, his middle brother, was living with Aunt Elisabeth and Frits, the youngest, with Opa, who had remarried after Oma's death in 1940. Frits was a three-year old with blond curly hair and light grey eyes.

Fred and I got along very well together. However, I asked him so many questions that it frightened him and he complained to my father, who took me aside to 'have a word'.
To my friends and the neighbours he was to be an evacuated relative, or better still, to walk away when asked who he was. Fred rarely went outside, anyway.

He played his part extremely well. I never knew that he pretended to go to school. He walked around the block and when I was out of sight, he returned home. Sometimes, usually when it rained, he could leave home after me, because 'his school was closer by'. I was totally taken in by that one! Willy had taken it upon herself to try and teach Fred. 'To help him with his homework', she explained to me. It required a lot of patience as he was not particularly very keen. I remember her shouting at him.

During the summer we went on a week's holiday and cycled all the way to Markelo to stay at a farm. Since the cows were in the fields, we slept on fresh straw in their stables. Great fun! The weather was good. We played hide-and-seek among the corn sheaves, or we went on bike-rides. On one of them we passed a butcher's shop where my mother spotted a magnificent piece of ham. Unfortunately she had left her purse behind, so we cycled all the way back to collect it. When we returned, the ham proved to be made of wood!

Every Friday night Fred would wear his kippah. Not to be outdone, I demanded one too. Margot, his mother, knitted me a nice woolly hat in the inevitable red, white and blue colours as a St. Nicholas present. She had also dressed my favourite doll, Pummeltje, in a gorgeous outfit all sewn by hand. Fred's parents were both there for the occasion.
All presents were individually tied to a long string from the kitchen chimney and right through the hall to the living room. My patience was tested to the limit, because my biggest present was the last one and right at the end of the string



Our holiday in Markelo

1943

At the end of 1942 the BBC broadcast some hopeful news. The British were fighting the Germans in North Africa!

Our stored, red, Edam was christened 'Tunis Cheese' and would be consumed as soon as Tunesia had fallen, which happened in March. I can't remember, but I bet it was delicious!

No BBC news was ever missed from now on. What really annoyed me were the discussions at home in either English or German. I felt very much left out. I thought myself disciplined enough not to talk about what went on in the home with anybody. One could not take any chances.

By now our home had become a through -house for people for whom a place to hide needed to be found. It was mostly for one person at a time. He or she slept in Wim's room and was usually gone by the time I got up. The introduction of the curfew had complicated matters, especially for Willy. Nights were far safer to move about, unseen, on her rounds to deliver coupons to the addresses of persons in hiding, or accompanied people to their new homes.

Years later, she told me about her fears, when she heard foot steps in the night, hoping there would be a dark corner to slip into, if need be. She always tried to pick the safest possible route, if she could manage it.

Finding new addresses was essential. There was a growing demand, not only for Jews, but also for students and young men. It was all very dangerous. You risked your life by putting them up and many people were just too scared.

The big question was who was really trustworthy? Money and favours were given for betrayals and not everybody was anti-German....

The badly needed money, clothing, but above all, false papers were my father and his group's department, later also joined by Willy.

Whatever went on behind the scenes, great care had been taken that, at least, the Sundays were kept as before. My father tried to choose a good story-telling vicar for the church service, often not the nearest to walk to! I found sitting still for an hour an ordeal, but the singing made up for it. Willy or a house guest would baby-sit for Hans, who was too young and Fred, who always managed an excuse why he could not join.

To my delight, a visit to my maternal Oma was on the agenda when the weather was not good enough for walks. Oma was quite short, not much taller than me. Her long hair was plaited into a bun at the back of her head exposing her wrinkled face with the kindest of dark brown eyes. She was extremely deaf and used a horn as a hearing-aid, which she avoided, if possible. Her help was indispensable during those years.

Every given opportunity was taken to curl up on a chair to read. Once a week we borrowed books from the library, but it was a very long walk. Occasionally we would cycle, with me on the carrier, holding the books.

However, a bike was an important mode of transport with which the Germans agreed. When they needed one they would stop you, take it and ride away on it! When they wanted even more, they would round up quite a number and load them onto trucks at the end of the day. So, we preferred to walk from then on.

Mr. Sanders, alias Mr. Ringeling, had been one of our more permanent guests of late. He had Wim's room, which was now out of bounds for everybody else. Mr. Ringeling had a round, friendly face, always smiling and his eyes twinkled behind his gold-rimmed spectacles. The little hair left on his head was grey. I guessed he must have been a lot older than Matty, his secretary, who had also been living with us before. I liked him and so did Matty.

She was a real beauty and great fun to have around, with lots of laughter. We often played board games together. I missed her when she moved upstairs to live with Lien and Jan Marijnis. Fred had left us for some reason and went to live with the family Landrok. He was the chauffeur for the same firm my father worked for. Fred had taken over Wim's allotment with great enthusiasm. His contributions to our food supply would now certainly make a difference. He would be missing his 'garden', as he called it. Of that I was convinced. I missed him as a friend. He had been with us for a year. My mother panicked when, one day, my father asked me what my headmaster was like. Could he be trusted? "Dick! What are you saying!?" she exclaimed. "Don't worry! I'll ask him if he belongs to the NSB", I suggested. I was strongly dissuaded to even think about it! In view of the 'activities' at home, my father thought it best to finally obey the 'last' order and hand in the radio. That way his name would be safely on that register. We had another one, anyway. I went with him to deliver it to the collection point at a school close by. I kissed it sadly goodbye, before it was put onto the pile. Also tin and copper had to be handed in. If you had a garden, you could bury it. We painted ours!

House searches took place at random, therefore, the less they could arrest you for, the better!

BETRAYAL

When a road had been closed off and I saw a truck parked in the middle of the street and armed soldiers going in and out of houses, I froze, especially when people were being led to the truck. The only place I wanted to be was at home.

My parents were very well aware of the danger they let themselves and the family into. Believe me; it must have taken a lot of heart-searching. Once you got involved, there was no way back. They could not have lived like a good Christian without helping others in need. Many years later I asked them if they would do it again, knowing what was to come? After some thought, their answer was still, "Yes, we would".

Mr. Sanders had fallen in love with Matty and decided he preferred to live together at the same address and also moved to Lien and Jan Marijnis' top flat. He wanted to leave his clothes at our house, behind locked doors. So now and then he would call in to change, but always after my bedtime. I rarely saw them.

Nobody knew about that impressive German officers-uniform or the revolver in his wardrobe. Who could have known? My mother certainly didn't. For her own protection, she was kept out of all the goings-on. She was incapable of telling lies, even white ones. Had she known about Wim, she might have been caught out, when people asked after him. Right up to the end of the war she believed he was in Germany, which worried her beyond imagination. She suffered in silence, rarely showing her feelings for Hans and my sake.

Neither my father nor Willy had told her that Wim was in hiding in De Bilt. Nevertheless, stress took its toll. She was dissatisfied with her photo on her I.D. card and had another one taken, on which she looked so old and haggard, showing the strain, that she stuck with the original. There was worse to come! Poor Matty! Her mother had been arrested and she was told that she would be released if she, Matty, could arrange a meeting with Mr. Sanders. What was she to do? The advice, of course, was dead against it. The Germans were obviously on his trail and he would be a big catch!

Whatever happened, I don't know, except that they met on het Valkenbosplein and she kissed him, whereupon Mr. Sanders was arrested and taken to the Gestapo Headquarters. Here he was spotted by an under-cover resistance worker, who heard that an address book with names had been found on him. Unforgivable!

Mr. Sanders always carried a cyanide pill, just in case. Whether he was able to swallow it, is not known. His body was later identified by his teeth. Matty's mother was never seen again, neither was Matty. All I knew, at that time, was that Mr. Ringeling had not come home that night. The next day started like any other. My father and Willy had gone to work. I was off to school and Hans and my mother enjoyed their time together.

At midday I hurried home for lunch, but nobody was in! I panicked. This had never happened before. I rang the bell, banged on the door and screamed. Lien found me sobbing at the bottom of the outside stair-case. I was frantic! She put her arms around me and explained that I would find my mother and Hans at Hedwig's

house at the end of our block of houses. Her husband, Toon, was at sea working with the Allies. He and my father had been friends since their school days. I spurted the 100 meters, or so, because I was afraid that I might be too late back for school. Also, what about my lunch? I was hungry!

My mother was sitting on a chair with Hans on her lap. She looked ashen. Perhaps she was ill? On this beautiful, sunny day she was wearing the terracotta dress she had just finished knitting the night before. What was going on? This is what had happened. Within minutes of Mr. Sander's arrest the members of this resistance group had been alerted by way of a jungle-drum method. The advice was to go into hiding immediately, with their family. My father had been warned at the office and he in turn warned Willy. Dr. V. did one of the rounds on his bike and told both Lien and my mother, "Get out!" and was on his way again to warn others. It took place quite early that morning; my mother wasn't even fully dressed yet. She was too scared to go upstairs, so she put on her knitted dress, which she had left in the living room. She may have taken her purse and maybe a toy for Hans, certainly nothing else. She picked Hans up and left the house.

Lien didn't think there was any need yet for such a hurry. Besides, she and her husband, Jan, relied also on a cyanide pill and they decided to stay put. My father, meanwhile, was waiting anxiously at the station. My mother was waiting for instructions from him. Willy raced up and down on her bike to convey their messages. It would have been so much simpler if we had had a telephone in those days.

During Willy's time of work experience at the Van Leer's Vatenfabrieken, she had stayed for a few months with Mr. and Mrs. Mulder in Vreeland. He had given her their address – in case. Finally, the three of them, my father and mother with Hans left The Hague for Vreeland, where my father remained. After a couple of days it was thought safer for my mother to go to uncle Ab, her brother in Kampen. Willy moved in with distant relatives, Rein Lenghaus and his three daughters, on the other side of The Hague, het Bezuidenhout. There were not many hours to spare before the start of the curfew. Where could I be taken to at such short notice? This was a big problem! sperktijd

Willy put me on the carrier of her bike and refused to listen to my whining. I wanted to go to our house – I wanted my mum – Where are we going to? etc. She probably told me to shut up. Understandable, of course. After all, she must have been under a tremendous strain.

At her wits' end, she had decided to ask Ds. Straatsma for help. He was the vicar by whom she had recently been confirmed, after attending his classes for the past year. Willy held my hand and rang the bell.

I recognised him straight away from the story-telling in church and as the man with the three moustaches. He had enormous black eyebrows. I was welcome, providing it would only be for few weeks or so. They were a very kind, older couple with a different life style from ours. I was just in time to join them for dinner. I presumed that the finger bowl was for drinking out of. A good start! It must have been as difficult for them as it was for me. All I had were the clothes I stood up in, and that was it. No special outfit for the Sunday. I sat next to Mrs. Straatsma in her

pew. The church was over full. I heard her whisper to a friend, who wondered who I was, that I was a child of a family on the run.

This was the end of my childhood! It did not take the SS very long to turn up at Marijnis' and our house. Armed soldiers ran up the stairs and arrested Lien and Jan, who were both at home. Jan was sentenced to death and executed, maybe something to do with being a policeman. Lien was tortured, because they had found an empty holster in their house and they wanted to know the whereabouts of the revolver and the jewellery belonging to the Jews in hiding. Finally they let her go.

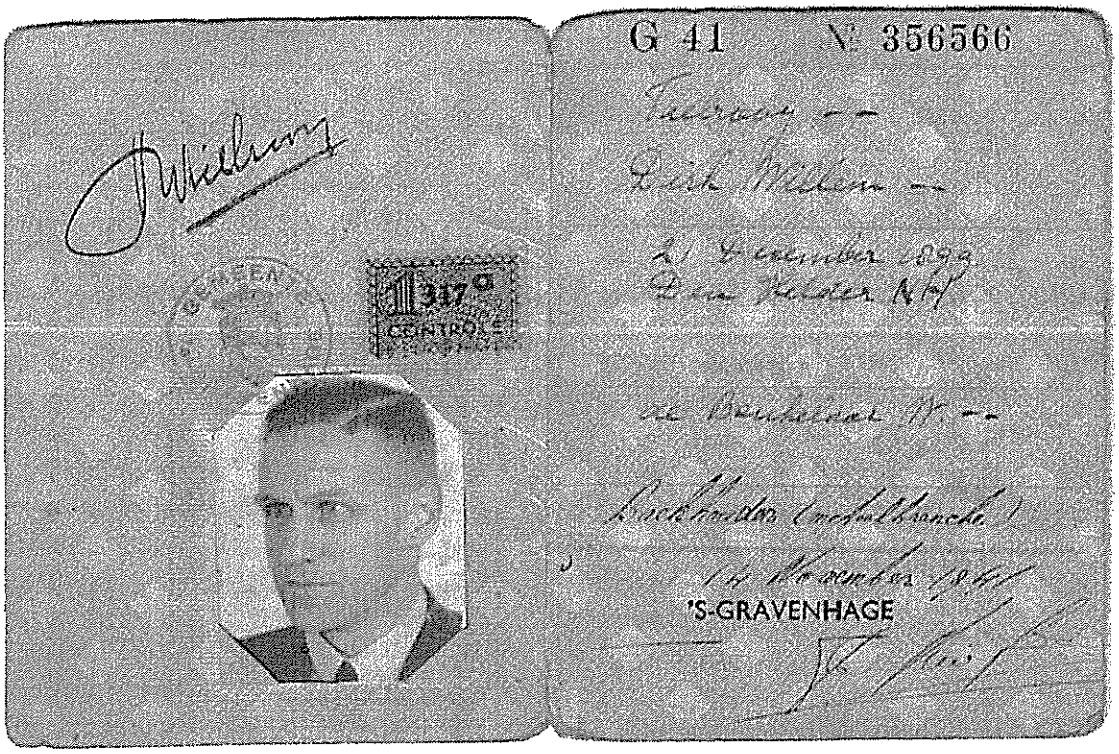
At the same time they were banging on our door, furious that nobody was in. They sealed the lock, which meant that the contents had now been confiscated and ready to be collected. The events of the last few days had been quite a blow to my mother and the fear for my father was choking her. Now she was about to lose her home, as well as the laboriously collected belongings. It saddened her deeply. Willy thought it a downright shame!

Besides, there was still that uniform and the revolver, together with a huge supply of cigarettes and expensive cigars, which my father was storing for a befriended tobacconist. Not to forget the stamp collection and the photographs... Willy's mind was quickly made up. It was worth the risk. First of all, the seal had to be broken. That was a daring deed in itself! There was no knowing when the SS would return to collect the contents... The first time the bell rang, Willy jumped out of her skin, but it only happened to be the milkman. It made her realise she had to have an escape-route ready. 'Via the roof', she told me later. She packed for three days and three nights, as quickly as possible. To avoid suspicion from the outside she left the curtains behind. The vast amount of bottled food she handed to a neighbour to look after, until it could be picked up at a later date. She had even packed a separate suitcase with clothes for each of us. What a godsend that she had even thought of that!

She had ordered a removal van for 5.30 a.m. and when it drew up, she handed them the keys and she herself hid behind a bush in the park to watch it all going according to plan. Part of the contents was bound for uncle Ab in Kampen, who had a ware-house, the rest was being stored in a garage in the Celebesstraat, which Willy had rented. One can only imagine how she must have felt when she turned the key in that lock! After the war I heard how it had enraged the Germans when they found that the birds had flown and the house had been emptied. The indentations of the butts of their guns had marked the front door. An all-out hunt for my father had already begun. At 1 a.m. the SS arrived at the house of his boss, Mr. Van Oortmersen, and because he could not give them any information, he was arrested and deported to a concentration camp in Germany, where he remained until the end of the war. Opa could not tell them either where his son might be. He was taken to the Scheveningen prison, alias 'Oranje Hotel', together with Trijn, his wife, and Frits, where he was interrogated by the Gestapo.

My father was devastated and wanted to turn himself in. However, it was pointed out to him that that would not release them and that he would be shot, if he were lucky. 'There was still far too much to be done for so many others'. There may have been inside help. After a week Opa and Trijn, including Frits, were free to go. Opa even asked for the return of the box with the silver guilders that had been taken

at the house-search! I don't know whether it ever was.. My father had obtained a new I D card in the name of Swaagman, who had been born in Indonesia, which could not be checked, because of the war with Japan. His present address was a bombed housing estate, somewhere in Groningen. The most dangerous part was the taking of the legitimate photograph with your left ear showing. He decided to wear spectacles for this occasion. His picture showed his anxiety!



Above; My father's real ID-card
Below; My fathers false ID-card

The Resistance had asked the RAF if they would bomb the Kleikamp, a large villa opposite the Peace Palace in The Hague, where the data of the population were kept, because they needed to be destroyed as a matter of urgency. This took place in April 1944. Only from then on could my parents, and everybody else with false papers, begin to feel a little more at ease with their new identities. My mother did not really have enough to occupy herself with in Kampen. She missed my father and the distance between them made her feel lonely. On very rare occasions, she and Hans would travel to Vreeland to visit him for a weekend. Far from an ideal situation.

As it was, uncle Ab and aunt Kitty, his wife, lived above the premises of his transport business with far too many strangers moving about the place. Besides, they had just become the parents of a baby daughter, Margreet. My mother was concerned about the danger in which she was putting her brother and his family and she also realised their fear about her staying with them. When she heard Willy's good news she was so happy and so relieved. Through contacts with Mr. Stoffels and his Jewish wife, Willy had managed to rent a large room on the second floor at the back of their old patrician house in the Joh. Verhulststraat. A quiet area in Amsterdam-Zuid. Our furniture from the garage in The Hague was moved in, including the piano. It happened to be a most welcome fall-back address in time to come! As for me, my weeks at the Straatsma's had come to an end. To my surprise I met up with Fred again at my next address. We were both delighted and hugged each other like long lost friends. A pity that I could only stay there for a week. Fred appeared extremely happy living with the family Landrok and not having children of their own they, in turn, had really taken to him. They formed a cheerful trio. I am sure I was jealous and felt left out. They could handle Fred, but not me. I was mixed up and unsettled, even dramatically threatening with suicide if the war had not ended in three weeks. A week later Willy came to collect me. They were pleased to see me go!

KOOTWIJKERBROEK

Ds. Straatsma had kindly organised for me to live with two of his lady friends, who, years ago, had been his confirmation candidates and they had kept in touch with each other ever since. At last Willy and I had caught the train to Barneveld. For most of the way armed German soldiers were getting on and off, which made me feel nervous.

Willy had not been able to give me any more answers to the numerous questions I put to her during our long journey, bar telling me that I was going to stay at a farm. This could turn out to be rather like one of our family holidays, except that I would be there by myself. I was excited and apprehensive at the same time!

We were the only passengers leaving the station, where we met the two ladies waving at us from an open horse-drawn carriage, the only available transport. Buses and taxis had stopped running already quite some time ago.

We soon left Barneveld behind and were driving into the open countryside of the Veluwe, one of Holland's beauty spots. The unobstructed view was such a contrast with a city, like The Hague. We passed large pinewoods, acres of purple heather and yellow cornfields which, in those days, were mingled with red poppies and blue cornflowers. Now and then we came across a village with their small houses or huge villa's.

The regular rhythm of the horse's hoofs was the only distinctive sound. Whilst Willy held an animated conversation, I sat quietly in a corner clutching my small suitcase. From time to time I dared to glance at the two middle-aged women and wondered what they would be like and what would be in store for me.

Ursula had been a nurse and Rita a teacher. After they had both retired early, they decided to buy and run this remote smallholding in Kootwijkerbroek. It was a typical, traditional farm with a thatched roof. The green, wooden shutters on the outside of the tall windows were always being closed at nightfall.

The living room was massive with two huge open fireplaces at either end. I noticed a large side of smoked bacon hanging up in one of the chimneys. Even the grand piano did not appear to fill much space at all. Ursula and Rita shared a bedroom with a four-posted bed each, draped in clouds of organza. In a corner of the room was a shower-cubicle, but not for me to use. I can't actually remember ever having had a bath as such. It merely amounted to a strip wash in the large, tiled washroom, which was a part of the barn. My bedroom, under the rafters, was small but comfortable and I was able to see the stars at night through the skylight, which made me feel happy and secure. The barn formed an integral part of the house and was joined up by the same roof. A door through the hall gave access to the animals there. Our brown, blazed horse, called Vos, had already been put back into his stable again and was tugging at the hay from a rack above his head. The jet-black horse next to him appeared to be a less friendly one. They were facing the two Frisian dairy-cows at the opposite side of the threshing-floor.

Fortunately, we had used the inside door into the barn. No way would Willy or I have dared to enter from the outside through those enormous barn-doors, guarded

by five huge dogs on long chains, which gave them plenty of scope to move about. Normally they would be in their baskets, but if anybody came near, even Ursula or Rita, they would jump up and bark ferociously. Willy and I were not keen! The most affable one of the dogs was a St. Bernard with his drooling face and at least twice my size.

Outside we spotted many farm-cats and an abundance of chickens roaming about freely, not paying any attention to anybody. The geese waddled away under loud protest. Maybe somehow, they knew that they were being fattened up for the Christmas dinner!

It seemed an ideal place for me to stay and Willy was relieved that she did not have to worry about my lodgings anymore. The following day we took her back to the station with the black horse. He was much faster than Vos and because I started to scream, he bolted. It was a scary moment, therefore, on the way back I was handed the reins to show me that there was really no need to be afraid of him. Just before Willy departed, Ursula had suggested bringing more clothes next time and they would write to her regularly to keep her informed about me. As neither of them ever went near shops, they had no idea that nothing was obtainable anymore. Willy was going to receive many letters with complaints about my clothes or the money. It was never enough. Luckily, my father's firm kept paying him his salary throughout the war years and had to honour the ladies' requests. What else could he have done? In his situation he was at their mercy. I soon settled into the routine of farm-life. Rita and Ursula took care of everything themselves with no help, except for harvesting and sowing, when neighbouring farmers helped each other. I quite liked to be treated as an equal and I was soon turning into a useful farm-hand. Milking the cows I found too difficult, but I could churn the butter and this became my job, which suited me fine, because I could do this sitting next to the fire. The only other warm place was the kitchen. I must say, both ladies were very good cooks. The three of us always took a break after lunch. Two big wooden crates covered with a mattress made up my midday bed in an alcove, off the living room. I had seen the mill around the corner was in action, so I wandered up to it. The miller and his wife were pleased to see me and asked me in. They showed me how a corn-mill worked. However, I was more interested in their seven children and I promised to call in again soon.

Rita had other ideas. For some reason she disapproved of my visit to them. She had suddenly decided that I should not miss out on my education. Since there was less work to be done on the farm at this time of the year, my lessons were scheduled for the morning and Rita would be able to do the marking during our rest-period after lunch. Little did she know I could hear her every comment to Ursula! Each spelling mistake had to be corrected and written out again ten times. Not funny when, one day, she counted 117 of them! It made me stay in bed a lot longer to avoid her punishment, but at least it taught me to be more accurate. How I hated the lessons from now on, as well as being prevented to play with the miller's kids, because of lack of time.

There were so many jobs for me to do, that I was not given a chance to be lonely. I loved to help with grooming the horses and feeding the animals- even the grunting pig in the other big barn, which also held the two carriages. The fallen apples in the orchard had to be gathered and prepared, by slicing and stringing up, to be dried. Every Friday the gravel around the farm had to be raked, making my arms

ache! My shoes were useless for this type of life. I had to wear wooden clogs instead, for which Ursula had kindly made me a pair of soft, velvet insteps and told me to line the clogs with hay when my feet were sore or cold. That helped, when I had to make the long trek to the only available, small shop. Although the farm was self-sufficient, certain items had to be bought.

I was totally unprepared for the day the butcher arrived. The pig was dragged out of his pen onto a table near the barn. He squealed whilst hot water was being poured over him, to soften the hairs to make shaving them off easier. This, I could not bear! I fled upstairs into my bed and put my pillow on my head to drown the noise. Very much later, when I eventually ventured to go downstairs, I found the pig hanging, splayed, on a ladder in the hall. I screamed! They laughed! On the floor, at the bottom of the ladder were several bowls containing the insides, marked with the inspector's purple stamps of approval. I found the whole scene revolting and I did my utmost to avoid the hall. This side of farming was not for me. Neither was the digging up of sugar-beets with a fork in the evenings. There was still a small area to be done, before the frost arrived and the ground would become too hard.

When it was dark, Jan would turn up to help. I had never seen him before. He was a student in hiding, who lived in a hollowed-out hay-stack in the farm-yard. A man of few words and did not appear to be very happy. With clear skies and by moon light we were like shadows in a spooky story! Willy had made a special effort to arrive the day before my birthday, to be with me on the actual day. She was amazed to see how I had grown in all directions in such a relatively short time, an obvious result of a healthy life. No wonder, the ladies had complained about my clothes being too tight. Willy's present to me was a book, as well as two new dresses. One, dark blue, inserted with knitted red and white stripes, the other was a 'two made into one'. I don't know how she had found the time for it. Anyway, they fitted and I liked them. Rita was not over impressed. Ursula's opinion was kinder.

The next day Willy had to leave before I got up, in case I would be upset! This was worse and I cried for days. They had done this once before with my father. One night I had been in the wash-room, when I saw a light approaching through the half-round stable window. My heart stopped, but it happened to be my father on his bike, delivering a rush mat they said they needed. I had to go to bed soon after, and by the morning he had already left. That, I found difficult to forgive.

We were having great problems with mice, which had to be solved before it got even worse than it was already. They had entered the house, scurrying across the floors and having a feast in the pantries. As the cats were unable to cope with that number, a mouse hunt was organised. A fair amount of sheaves of corn was stored above the stables, under the rafters.

Rita and Ursula clambered up a rickety ladder to throw it all down onto the threshing-floor. They discovered that it was infested with nests. I had been given a clog in each hand and my task was to kill as many as I could. The dogs went berserk when hundreds of mice scattered all over the place and all the while I stood, petrified, with my arms raised. When finally the exhausted ladies came down, they could have gladly throttled me for not killing a single mouse!

It would soon be Christmas and the preparations were in full swing. It had been tradition that Ds. Straatsma and his wife would come to stay for those days with Rita and Ursula. The living room was already decorated and looked a picture, with a big tree in the middle and lots of branches around the fire-places. It was all very cheerful, especially with the candles, which had been bought and put away when they were still available, some years ago. We had a lovely time together and I felt quite happy. It helped that I knew them. The dinner was indeed a goose, stuffed with dried apples. Not my taste! Ds. Straatsma played the grand piano for hours on end and I thoroughly enjoyed the music. As I was not allowed, and the ladies could not play, this was the only time it was being used. Not long after the New Year, Ursula developed a brain tumour and two of the miller's children had diphtheria, so the mill had been put in quarantine. Apart from the running of the farm, Rita had to cope with nursing Ursula and revealed a warm-hearted side of herself that I had failed to detect before. Ursula, though in constant pain, was more affectionate towards me than ever. Looking back, I think that Ursula had been dominated by Rita in many respects. In the meantime arrangements had been made for me to move to Van Reemst's big egg-farm in Barneveld. The presence of soldiers in town reminded me that it was war time, of which there had been so little evidence in Kootwijkerbroek.

This farm was huge and possibly the biggest in the area. I was fascinated by the incubator with the many trays, each filled with hundreds of eggs, and sometimes I was lucky enough to witness the cracking of a shell. The chicks were then sold off, but how did he get the eggs? How come, there were none in the shops? He also kept pigs, lots of them! It did not take long to find me near their pens. I would far rather be doing something on the farm, than facing the two teenage daughters who totally ignored me. The farm-hands were more than willing to teach me how to help a sow, when she was about to drop her litter of piglets. They did their best to keep me busy.

When an alarm went off, many of the farm-hands disappeared into thin air. This happened again one afternoon, but this time German soldiers were wandering in. They poked their bayonets into the (hollowed-out) hay-stacks, where I knew some of the farm-hands were hiding. The soldiers left, satisfied. I didn't dare look up, in case they had noticed how scared I was!

The last unfortunate incident had been spreading liquid stable- manure onto the fields. A horse pulled a square box filled to the brim, when a wheel found a hole. I lost my balance, and got a ducking! The water from of the pump outside was freezing cold. I stank for days after! This address was not the right place for me, after all, and also far too expensive. When the train stopped in Kampen, uncle Ab was at the station and greeted me with a big smile. Suddenly I realised how I had missed being hugged!

It was almost like living at home again and be able to enjoy all the things young girls like to do. It was a real privilege, when aunt Kitty fetched me her two precious dolls with a box of clothes for them. They were beauties, with real, long hair and eyes that could close. Henny, who lived a few doors away; adored dolls and we spent many happy hours playing together. Her father had a bakery and, needless to say, I went often to her house, tempted by the wafting smell of baking. Riki, also my age, was the girl next door. Her mother was a widow and made the hats she sold in

her shop. We were allowed to make our own creations from the scraps. The three of us had hilarious times together. What a marked contrast between this and delivering a sow! Margreet, my cousin, was a lovely one-year-old and I found it great fun to help my aunt with taking care of her, especially at bath time. She smiled readily.

Kampen was the old town near the mouth of the Yssel that had belonged to the medieval Hanseatic League, a pact which promoted European trade. Uncle Ab often tried to find time to take me on walks along the river and, like my father, he always pointed out something of interest, whether it was shoeing horses or, on this particular day, taking me up the church tower. Every day, at noon, a tune was being played on the carillion. It was surprising that the bells were still there. The chimer showed me that it was similar to playing a piano, except that you had to hit the keys with a fist. He encouraged me to try and indicated the keys I should press. I was thrilled to hear my notes resounding across the town!

Uncle Ab was always singing and you couldn't help but joining in. He had a beautiful tenor voice. I heard him singing duets with a contralto, who had been his teacher and friend for many years. I could have listened for hours. Since nobody could possibly predict how long the war was going to last, I could not remain here for however long that might be. We were all upset when I left and I was given the promise that I would be more than welcome to return, after the two months' visit of aunt Kitty's mother.

Where next? For a few days to our rented room in Amsterdam! My mother and Hans were staying here for a while with my father. This was like a dream come true! We had not seen each other, since we had left our home in The Hague, many months ago. No words could describe my happiness! Hans had grown a bit and was chatting all day long. He had a sense of humour and could burst out laughing over little things. My parents seemed happier too. They avoided to travel together, so when my father had to go Heilo to see Opa, I begged him if I could come along. In a way I'd wished, I hadn't.

Opa and Trijn, just released from being interrogated again, were very upset, because Frits had been taken away by the Gestapo. He had been in the garden when they came to pick him up, in broad daylight. Though I had not been able to follow much of their conversation, I gathered that it was a serious matter. My father was very quiet during the journey back to Amsterdam.

Years later we were to hear more about the details. Willy had cycled up to Heilo to warn Opa about a rumour that an eye was being kept on his house and to suggest taking Frits to the nearby cloister. It could not have been easy, especially for Trijn, a one-time matron, or for a man like Opa, to follow advice from a self-assured girl of nineteen, but they agreed to send him there the following day, unaware of how close the enemy was. Although his whereabouts were known (Westerbork), efforts to rescue him failed. His final destination was Auschwitz; a four-year old and all alone..... Who betrayed him has never been found out.

The reality of war had, once again, left its indelible mark on many people.

ZEIST

Once again I was put on the carrier of Willy's bike to yet another destination. I was going to meet a surprise, she said, as long as I didn't ask any questions.

To make the ride more comfortable, I had a little cushion to sit on and I could put my feet on the foot-props. Willy's back provided me with some shelter, but also restricted my front-view. With my hands firmly tucked into her waistband, my arms followed her swaying body pushing hard against the wind. Of course we had stopped a few times on the way, but I was very glad when this long journey of about sixty km, from Amsterdam to De Bilt had come to an end. She put her bike against a high wall and opened a gate which led into the garden of a white-washed house. I was sure she had been here before! What a surprise! Mrs. Arks, the mother, came to meet us followed by her two sons and Wim!! Wim had heard about my predicament and through contacts with local friends, he knew about a children's home in Zeist that might be just the place for me. He had asked them to make the arrangements. It was only about ten km away and the knowledge that he, Wim, was close by would certainly help me to settle. It was obvious that Willy and Wim, as well as my father, had been in regular contact with each other. Zeist was a residential town on the edge of an extensive wooded part of Holland. The Slotlaan, the main avenue, finished at the gates of 'Het Slot', a historic castle, which was occupied by the Germans and guarded by armed sentries. On either side of the Slotlaan, just before getting to the castle-grounds, were two big squares. One was called Sister-square, where the church, the school and the homes were for the retired missionaries. The Kinderheim was opposite this, on Brother-square. Both were looked after by the Hernhutters'community. Zeist was the centre of the Hernhutters, a Christian sect, which had its origin in Bohemia and was, above all, noted for their missionary work, mainly in Africa.

Willy and I were welcomed in the main room of this multi-storey house, where a few small children were playing on the floor. Surely, these were not all of them? Before Willy had to leave, Sister Han (Stan) and sister Tine (Stine) gave us a guided tour through the house. Stan, grey-haired and slim, seemed the friendlier of the two and was in charge. Stine was the complete opposite, with dark, short, hair, well-built and robust. She took us first to the kitchen and the dining-room in the basement, which was no surprise as she was the cook, at the same time explaining the high cleaning standards she demanded from the group of children who were delegated to this job. "You will find out soon enough, how we work here together as a team", Stan added. Hearing the noise from the rest of the children who had just come home, we went upstairs to meet them. This was the moment when Willy decided that it was time for her to leave. Besides, Wim had asked her to call in and see him again on her way back to Amsterdam. After all, his knowledge about the home had been 'hearsay' from other people, therefore he insisted on getting a first-hand opinion from Willy.

I kept on waving, even after she had disappeared out of sight. I had never felt so lonely and deserted. Maybe the idea of a children's home created a sense of vulnerability in me? One of the reasons for the sporadic contacts with the family had been due to the distances between us. At least Wim was living nearby and, although he was in hiding and restricted in his movements, he could see the same clouds in the sky as I did, which was a comforting thought whenever I was upset.

How I yearned for the war to end! Stan took me by the hand and opened the door of the large living-room. The noise changed abruptly into a deadly hush. Many pairs of eyes were looking at me in surprise – apparently new-comers were rare! After Stan had introduced me, everybody started to talk at once and bombarded me with questions. Firstly, they were interested, (or worried) which bed I would sleep in. Asking about families was discouraged, which pleased me. They were mostly children whose parents were missionaries abroad and contacts were broken off, because of the war.

There were only four young boys and twelve girls of various ages, of whom Elly, the eldest at seventeen, had the same authority as the assistants, Mia, Dini and Nell. I felt bewildered and had not much to say. In fact, we were weighing each other up, but when they noticed how horrified I looked when they mentioned school, I met with their sympathy! School! Nobody had even hinted at that possibility! Fortunately it was holiday time, thus I could concentrate on the house-rules first. I shared a dormitory with four, rather nice, girls, who showed me how I had to fold my clothes at bedtime. I was exhausted and could easily have stayed in bed, when the gong woke us at 7 a.m. the following morning. The order of the day went according to a strict, almost military, regime. We had to strip to the waist and wash the top-half with cold water and then queue up to be checked that you were wet all over, before you were allowed to dry yourself. After you had made your bed, making sure no wrinkles were showing, you were sent down stairs. One by one we entered the dining room and when all of us were present, we could start our breakfast, a slice of bread with a glass of milk. Everybody was given a daily task. Those in charge of the basement stayed behind, while the rest of us spread out to different parts of the house carrying brooms, buckets and dusters.

I had to help with cleaning the basins and the toilets, the least fancied job of all! The rota changed every two weeks. A close eye was being kept on the one who excelled and, as a result, was then rewarded with privileged jobs, one of which was the honour to clean the rooms of the staff. In the course of time, I actually managed the top job: making Stan's bed! Holiday or not, everything had to be finished by 8.45 to fit in with school hours.

On Sundays we all went to the church on Sister Square, a white building with a very plain white interior, not even stained-glass windows for me to look at.

All the women sat together, wearing a lace cap (Haube) tied under the chin with a ribbon. Ours being pink, like all the un-married, blue for the married and white was worn by the widows. The service was held entirely in German of which I didn't understand a word. I always loved the singing, but only a few tunes were familiar to me and, because I could not read German, I was bored and glad to be outside again. A group of local children were passing by and stopped to watch us on our way home, intrigued, because to them we seemed to be a weird lot. They never missed an opportunity to quiz us about what went on in the home. Whenever we played outside, you could be sure some of them would try and join in. We were warned, no threatened, not to divulge anything, not even a simple question about what we ate for dinner. On the whole they were not too bad, except that the boys could be very cruel to the frogs they found in great number on the square. One of the reasons we didn't want much to do with them.

I had been fully accepted by our girls, who were excellent at inventing games, which helped when we were supposed to play outside between 2 and 4 in the afternoons, whatever the weather. Nell was always busy with washing and ironing, but Mia and Dini took us on regular walks to the woods instead, where we were able to roam freely amongst the trees, where we could shout as loudly as we wanted and run about like wild animals. Mia always tolerated our behaviour with a smile. She gladly shared her extensive knowledge of edible mushrooms with us, which we picked and then enjoyed them at meal- time. We also collected plenty of dry sticks to keep the cooker in the kitchen going.

During the evenings we would assemble in the living room, for reading, games or needle-work, like mending. No noise, of course, and early to bed!

I had a cautious respect for Stan, but I was afraid of Stine, who looked fierce and easily lost her temper. She had a cast in her eye and you never knew, if it was you she was looking at. One day, during breakfast, Henk, one of the small boys she often picked on, irritated her for some reason. She grabbed the biscuit tin and kept on hitting him on his head with it. Nobody moved a muscle, not even Stan. We were stunned. To relieve the tension, we were taken up into the loft to choose clothes for the new season. Excitedly, we rummaged through the enormous trunks filled with dresses of all sizes, hoping the chosen one would fit. I managed to claim the dress I liked, particularly for the half-round, green apron that went with it. All the clothes had been donated by charities and few dresses were the same. It was less difficult for the boys to make a choice, because they wore mostly sailor-suits and there were plenty available. Happily clutching our new outfits we lined up to go down the narrow ladder. The attic was out of bounds, except for occasions like these. I had a good look around and was not only amazed at the size of it, but above all impressed with the vast quantity of stored food. Besides sacks of potatoes, apples and lentils, I saw sugar, jams and honey. At least we would not have to starve! Funnily enough, the food was never mentioned. Neither was the war. By now it was the beginning of June 1944. Although I could not put my finger on it, I noticed that something was afoot. Even the people seemed different.

Recently, the activities of the Germans had increased and huge convoys were often on the move. There were also far more Spitfires about than ever before. One day, a number of trucks with armed soldiers passed us on our walk, being pursued by two Spitfires. They flew so low that we could see the pilot's face. The Germans abandoned their vehicles in a frantic hurry and jumped into the ditch, close to the bank. They stood all in a line, up to their necks in water, with just their helmets visible. If it had not been for the shooting, which frightened us, we would have laughed! We loved to see the Germans being scared off by the 'English Tommies'.

Nobody really knew much about the occupants of the castle, except that they were Germans. Who lived there and why? Was there more to it than that? It came as no surprise that the castle had been made a target. When the siren went, we all fled into the basement. The home shook and the flashes were blinding. Some of our windows upstairs were shattered and left the floors covered in glass. After the 'all clear' we had to wait until everything had been cleaned up before we could go back to bed, still shivering with a mixture of fear and being cold. The castle had received little damage and was quickly restored. Unfortunately, it was not possible for us to obtain glass for our windows!

AMSTERDAM '44/'45

The winter had made its entree with a vengeance and much earlier than usual. When I woke up I noticed the inside of the windows covered with patterns of pretty frost-flowers, which meant that it was bitterly cold outside. Willy had come to Vreeland to take me to Amsterdam. We would definitely have travelled by train, if they had still been running. Neither Willy nor I was looking forward to a journey by bike in this weather and hopefully this would be my last long jaunt on the back of one. The Mulders were quite concerned. After hugs all around, they double-checked that I was well covered up with even my head wrapped in a scarf, leaving just a slit for my eyes. My hands and feet felt like blocks of ice when, after several hours, we finally arrived at Willy's rented room in the Johannes Verhulststraat, where I was going to be with my mother and Hans.

Willy was cold and tired and decided to go straight home to the Uitweg, to Aunt Elisabeth's home, where she was staying at present. It was also the only safe place to keep the bike and besides, she had to be in before the curfew.

I had been here only once before on a very short visit. All I remembered was that the Joh. Verhulststraat had a long row of beautiful big trees in the middle of a wide road. I was overjoyed to be re-united with the family and I couldn't wait to run up the stone steps. Mr. and Mrs. Stoffels had already seen us and opened the front door before I had a chance to ring the bell. I dashed up the stairs to our room at the back on the second floor to surprise my mother and Hans. I was home! We had a lot to talk about, but once I had warmed up it didn't take me long to fall asleep in one of our own beds. Whatever the outside world, this room with its familiar furniture was our sanctuary! The Stoffels, who owned this old multi-storey house, lived on the first floor. All the other rooms were let, including the basement. Once or twice we passed the occupants of the front room, but we never saw the others. Our room looked out on the large back gardens of the houses around us and where, at regular intervals, a tree was being chopped down for fire-wood. Since the 9th of October, North-Holland had been the first province without electricity and a few days later the gas was disconnected too. People had to resort to emergency stoves. Ours was a majo, which looked like a large coffee tin with a small opening to draw the draught and it would only burn very small pieces of dry wood. It was placed on the original stove for safety. My mother never got the hang of it and would rather leave it to my father. It was quite an art. It needed continual blowing into the vent to keep it alight. However, since the rations had been reduced drastically and the food became so scarce, there was little use for the majo, except for boiling water.

A few weeks later I was well enough to join the family in Amsterdam. Except for Wim, we all lived near to each other again.

It was not until after the war when we heard about the raid on the cottage in de Bilt, where Wim lived. It had been surrounded by the SS., but Wim was lucky to have been able to escape through the toilet window into a corn-field behind the house. Among the arrested were his friends, the boys Arks. So far, Holland had endured the occupation for well over four years. After the Battle of Britain, the Germans had focussed their attention on Eastern Europe, having given up on England for the time being. When and where were they going to stop? That was the question.

The Germans controlled the news-papers and their successes made big headlines and were also blurted out on the radio. To them it was a morale-booster; to the Dutch it was worrying. The Resistance had issued and circulated two illegal newspapers, Trouw and Parool, in order to report a more honest and realistic version of events. Printing and even delivering the papers was a dangerous undertaking. Also the BBC news was indispensable and was received secretly by a hidden and often cleverly-concealed radio. Both, the papers and the BBC, were vital contributions to reassure the nation and give them hope. The German news never reported their defeats and certainly said nothing about the successes of the Allies who, we hoped, were on their way to help us.

After North-Africa and southern Europe, came Normandy on June 6th.'44. Although still a long way away, the liberation of Western Europe had begun. First Paris, followed by Brussels and finally, by September 3rd, the southern part of Holland was free. The Germans seemed defeated and fled north. There was such a quick succession of events that the news was scanty and even the BBC got confused. In Rotterdam it was mentioned that Breda had been liberated and the people in The Hague were waiting for the arrival of the British troops. The whole of the population was deliriously happy. Even the Dutch flag appeared in places, which was strictly forbidden. The Germans and NSB members loaded their (stolen) cars and bikes and fled towards Germany. Alas, the rumours turned out to be false! Therefore, September 5th became known as Dolle Dinsdag! (Mad Tuesday)

There were obstacles. Crossing the bridges over the river Rhine proved impossible. The advance had to be halted, giving the Germans the opportunity to tighten their grip on the north of Holland. At last I understood the reason why the evacuees had come to Zeist! The trains stopped running on September 15th. The Dutch Government in London had advised the railway-personnel to strike and to go into hiding, but not before putting the trains out of action first.

In retaliation, the Germans stopped all alternative food-transport. Consequently the west of Holland, north of the big rivers, was facing the last winter of the war under the worst circumstances imaginable! We braced ourselves for this period in Amsterdam.

usually we could find one who pitied us and donated about half a litre. Not much, but as long as we collected enough for the baby! We always tried several farms for more milk for ourselves as well, often without much luck. Whilst on one of my rounds, it was snowing hard with that horrible pack-snow, which quickly stuck to our clogs. When we hobbled past the castle, the guard on duty offered to remove the snow with his bayonet and even gave us a biscuit! If only we had not mentioned it to anybody when we got home, we would not have had that spanking!

How we all loathed having to play outside every day, even in cold weather. If only there had been some snow, we could have built snow-men; otherwise there was little else for us to do. Hans, in particular, suffered in his thin summer-coat. He also complained about his feet hurting and, for that reason, he could only wear Wellingtons and thin socks. We sympathised with him. Most of us suffered with painful chilblains, which were treated by putting our toes into a chamber-pot with (our own) freshly-produced urine! One day, when Hans could not possibly face being outside again, he decided to hide. He thought he'd be better off in the loo instead. He almost got away with it, if it had not been for one of the boys who told on him. Hans had to pay dearly for this! It must have been agony for him to be sent out immediately, on his own, and walk around the square for an hour. He looked so lost! How I hated the kids that were laughing at him from behind the window. It was dark when he came back in and yet again I was prevented to console him.

It was towards the end of 1944 when my mother paid us a surprise visit, still wearing her terracotta dress! She had cycled all the way from Amsterdam on her bike without the tyres, one way of preventing the Germans to confiscate it. The first thing Hans did was to show my mother his feet. She was horrified. The staff tried to assure her that 'all will be better by the time spring is here'. My mother was being put up for the night in the attic, but her mind was already made up, whatever the consequences. The staff was furious when, the next morning, she told them that she was taking Hans away with her. They informed her that, in that case, I must leave too. My life was made far from easy during the weeks I had to wait for Willy to collect me. Meantime, a solution had to be found at short notice for Hans and myself. On their way back to Amsterdam, my mother stopped in the Bilt to call on Wim who, after seeing Hans' feet, asked Mrs. Arks to arrange an appointment with the doctor. He diagnosed frost-bite and advised that, on no account, was Hans to walk on them and to seek medical advice as soon as they got home. I was counting the days for Willy to arrive to take me to wherever. Anywhere would be better than here! I was desperately unhappy since Hans had left.

Half-way, between Zeist and Amsterdam, was Vreeland. The initial address my father had stayed at was always available to be used as an occasional hide-out for either Willy or my parents. Now it was my turn to be there. Mr. and Mrs. Mulder made me feel at home straight away. I was pleased with the warm house and to see their large, well-stocked kitchen-garden. However, I was under-nourished to such an extent, that I was only allowed to eat a little and often, a table-spoonful to start with. Gradually the portions were increased to normal amounts. The house was next door to a farm and I soon got to know the farmer's wife, who was well-built and cheerful. I enjoyed feeding the animals for her. She was determined to play her part in my recovery and suggested that I should come every morning to be fattened up with proper cream, as long as I didn't tell the Mulders! Anyway, it had no ill-effects and I have loved cream ever since...

We were getting worried about the reduction of our food-rations. The next few weeks would be the ideal time for harvesting the produce a forest can provide. To supplement our rations we made daily treks, carrying an array of containers, as well as pulling a cart to transport the wood. The youngest ones loved having a ride in it on the way there; otherwise the journey would surely have been too tiring for them.

It proved to be a good year for mushrooms and we collected baskets full of different kinds, thanks to Mia. Berries were plentiful and were squeezed and then sieved. If sugar had been available the juice would have tasted nicer. We spread the pulp on our dry slice of grey bread, which made a change from the usual tomato-ketchup.

One day, when the weather was unsuitable for the woods, we had to make do with playing on the square. We had discovered an orchard covered with fallen apples and we stuffed, as many as we could, under our clothes and hid them when we got home. Would you believe it! The owner came to complain about his loss and the police was called in. If it were ever to happen again, we would go to prison!

For punishment I lost my privileged job of making Stan's bed and got transferred to cleaning the dining-room on my own for at least a month. Placed on top of a small stool, in a recess of one of the walls, was the dog's feeding-bowl. Later on, when I really started to feel very hungry, I could not resist the temptation. His food was much better than ours. I licked some of it like a dog, so it could not be detected. Where did the potatoes and the beans come from? Or could it have been the leftovers from a staff's dinner, after we had gone to bed? Nobody seemed to pay much attention to the dog's food and I had learned to keep my mouth shut. When we had gone up into the attic again for warmer clothes, it was noticed that a lot of the stored food had disappeared and somebody commented on it. The 'hungry' evacuees were blamed.....The branches were arched by the weight of the heavy crop of elderberries and feeling hungry, we promptly took the opportunity to eat them there and then.

We never found out, if it had been the berries, or indeed an outbreak of the widespread dysentery why we were so ill and many of us, including Hans, had ended up in the sick-room. The doctor prescribed Norit, a dry, black powder, three times a day a tablespoon, washed down with water. It made us choke! How on earth could they have been so cruel to Hans, who had accidentally soiled his bed, to make him wash his sheets in the sink with that icy-cold water! I tried to help him, which was refused and I was sent back to bed. They told me that he had to be taught a lesson! The winter had arrived and with no central heating in those days, you often felt inside as cold as being outside, especially upstairs with make-do windows. We all felt sorry for the latest arrival, a small baby that cried all day long. This presented a big problem. She needed milk and there wasn't any! We had all gathered in the living-room to see who could come up with an idea how to obtain milk. We loved being involved. The solution was quite simple really and by asking us, they could bank on our full cooperation. It was pointed out that it was not just a project for a week or so, but maybe for months of going daily to the nearby farms.

We all agreed and for everybody older than 11, a rota was drawn up for groups of two. That worked out at about once a week. This meant getting up at 5 a.m. to arrive at the farms at milking-time. Though some of the farmers refused,

The children's home-Zeist

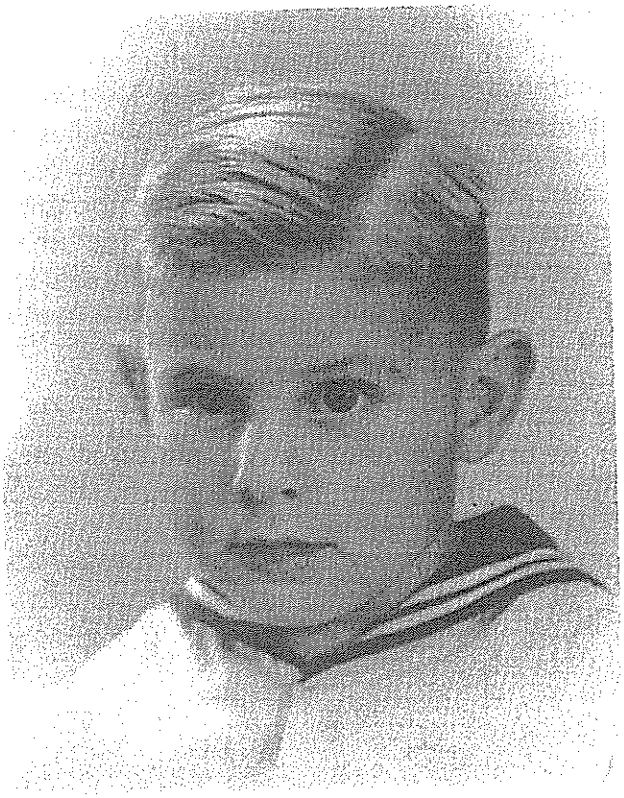
A surprise visit to Wim

Back home again from our frequent walks to the woods, I was told to report to the office to see Stan. This sounded so formal, that everybody wondered what it could be about. Usually messages were given in passing. To be called to the office was only for serious matters. With a heavy heart I knocked on the door. Stan was sitting behind her desk and told me to take a seat. She informed me that my father was coming to visit me, together with my mother and Hans! I could not believe my ears. Stan had a lot more to add, but I did not listen to the rest. All I heard was that Hans was coming to stay here, with me. Then she mentioned something about responsibility and though he was my little brother, I should not pamper him, etc. I could not care less about that. I was too delighted! Hans had great difficulty in accepting his and my parents' new surname of Swaagman. Therefore, it was considered the best option for all concerned that Hans should join me in this relatively safe environment.

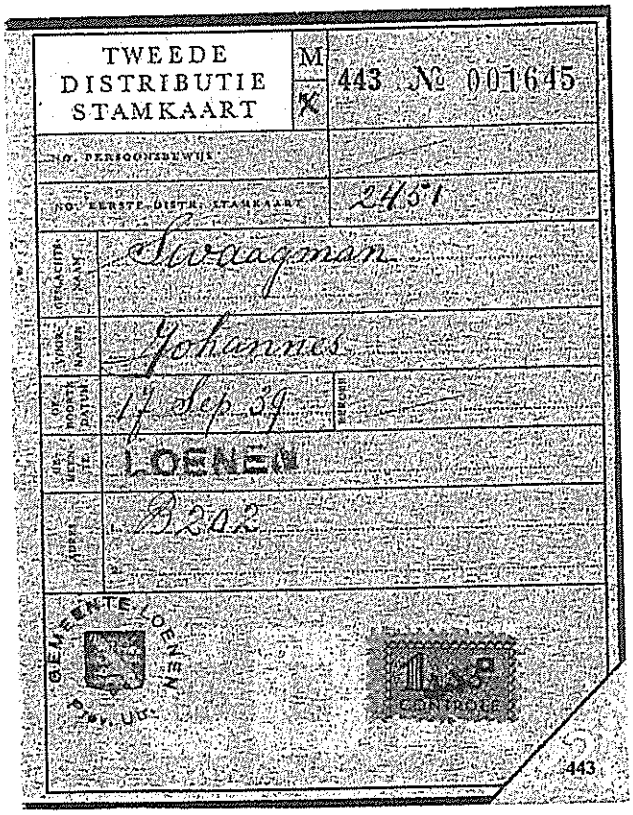
My mother and Hans had never been apart for longer than a day. Now she had to leave him behind and nobody could predict for how long. On their homeward journey my father had planned a big surprise for my mother. Ever since Wim had left, in 1942, she assumed that he was still in Germany. I can't begin to imagine, how my mother must have felt when she finally met up with Wim again, that he was alive, that she could touch him! Wim, also very happy, smiled at my father while hugging my mother. At last, she was let into the secret of his whereabouts. It did not lessen her anxiety, but this was better than Germany. Hans was not quite five years old. He looked so helpless after our parents had left. The first few days I was allowed to be protective towards him, but all too soon I was given silly tasks to do, in order to make Hans less dependent on me and force him to find his own way.

Regular testing for 'immediate obedience' was one of the priorities. At the most inconvenient times an order would be given and you'd better not hesitate! It was supposed to be for our own safety - it was war after all. Poor Hans. He was in trouble! He would always do as he was told, but, alas, not quickly enough to their liking. Whenever I tried to defend him, I got a severe telling-off. That made me very unhappy. All in all Hans and I were able to visit Wim twice during our stay in Zeist and since we had so much fun with him, it never entered our heads to talk about the home.

September 1944. We were not informed about what was happening in the outside world, we could but observe. We noticed the night-flying of heavy bombers high overhead. We heard that the trains had stopped running altogether and that evacuees were being put up regularly for the night in the attic, but not where they came from or were heading for.



Hans and his false papers.



The school had already been reduced to only two days a week for quite some time and since the bombardment also caused damage to the school-building and the summer holidays were not far off, the decision was taken to close. Anyway, I don't think the few weeks I attended the lessons added much to my education. We were being taught by the old missionaries in small classes of about five or six pupils, hence no chance to step out of line. Maybe that is the reason why the only thing I remember is a prank. The teacher had mentioned her fear of frogs; therefore, one of the girls released one in the class-room to try her out. The teacher screamed and jumped onto a chair. The girl realized her stupidity and although she was sorry, she got expelled. Soon afterwards we were all at home, because our school was being closed for good!

The room in the Johannes Verhulststraat was mainly used by Willy or my parents for an occasional break. As a rule, they all lived together at Aunt Elisabeth's and as from now, I was going to stay there as well. It was a long way, much too far for Hans, whose feet had not quite healed up yet, so my father decided to collect him. With each trip you always ran the risk that your bike might be confiscated, especially in the city, but Hans' feet could give him a valid excuse, in case he was being stopped. Besides, a bike without tyres was less in demand.

Not so long ago, the city-tram would have taken us as far as Sloterdijk, a small village on the fringe of Amsterdam-West, but since the electricity cut and people making off with the sleepers for fuel, no more trams meant that my mother and I had to go on foot. Fortunately we were good walkers. We had so much to talk about on the way that I was not aware of either distance or time. My mother told me that Annamie was back - I didn't know she had been away! My aunt thought, her daughter would get better fed if she went to stay with an uncle in Bergen, but she was home-sick and had returned a week later. Good, otherwise I would have been without her company. We were about the same age and we got on very well together. I heard about their fun on St. Nicholas' Eve, albeit without the usual goodies. Nothing could possibly have broken the tradition of writing poems, even without any presents. However, there was a surprise! A bunch of carrots each! A pity, I had missed all this, as I was still in Vreeland.

Before I realized, we had reached Sloterdijk and the end of the built-up area. My heart sank!! Ahead of us was an enormous expanse of sky, right down to the horizon, covering a never-ending, flat landscape of empty fields and a few isolated farms! How much further? Where was the house? We kept following the main road alongside the Haarlemmer Trekvaart, the oldest canal in Holland, until we came to a windmill where we turned left into a narrow road, appropriately called, the Uitweg (the Road to Nowhere).

At last we could see the house, about another half a mile away. Before the schools closed down, my cousins had to walk this distance every day in all weathers. I could not believe that it took them only half an hour.

It was the only house in the Uitweg, standing all by itself. The nearest neighbour was a farm a bit up the road. We crossed the hump-bridge, past the large willow-tree by the side of it, towards the front door. It was a big place. It had to be, because we were now with thirteen! Five of us, five of Aunt Elisabeth's and three more 'lodgers'. I knew about John, Fred's brother, age-wise between Hans and Wim, my other cousin. On the way my mother had told me about tante Hans, who apparently was an excellent cook and old Opa Johannes. And he was old! When I met him, he was fast asleep in a chair with a hanky over his thin face and a cap on his head. He was annoyed when we poked fun at him, but we resented having to be quiet for so long. I didn't know at the time that they were Jews in hiding.

With the building of the Atlantic Wall (beginning '40 's) all people living within 2 miles from the coast had to vacate their homes. That included my granddad (see picture) who moved to Heilo (Frits story) and my aunt.
She found this isolated house in the middle of nowhere, West of Amsterdam. (built +'34)
By now some trees, a bridge, a shed and a terrace had appeared. Ideal!
No Razzias thanks to the "gasbell", a metal pipe in the tree indicating Germans about! They sometimes used the shed and had to have the use of the bathroom.
Safe for 3 hiding Jews and my Dad. The Lion's den springs to mind!

We all lived together in the house at Uitweg

There had been no point in objecting when a decree was issued to billet twelve German soldiers in the attic. After a few weeks, the men convinced their commander that the house was too over-crowded and got him to agree that the soldiers could move into the shed instead, provided they had free access to the bathroom. This was a much better arrangement under the circumstances! The family's big advantage was a 50 cm. metal pipe, the 'gas-bell', suspended in the willow tree. This indicated the presence of Germans and therefore, when a raid took place, this house was left alone. We were safe in the lion's den!

Just as well I was warned that I might suddenly bump into a soldier on the stairs or in the kitchen. The first time it happened I felt ill at ease; they carried a gun everywhere, even to the bathroom! We didn't really meet them very often.

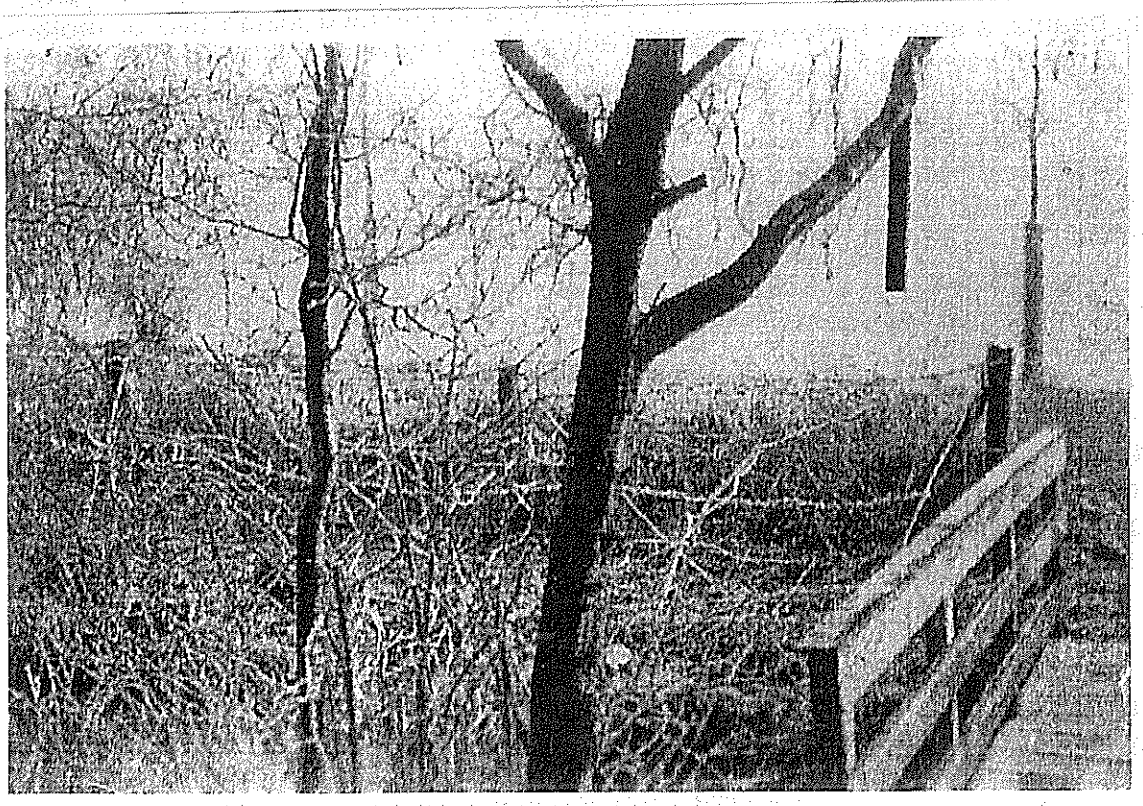
All day and every night the continuous drone of heavy bombers on their way to Germany was a reminder of war-time. During the day we saw them coming over in large formations. (Americans by day and British by night) Across this part of Holland they tried to fly high enough not to get within the reach of anti-aircraft guns. If a plane had been damaged during their mission and was trying to return to Britain, it was an easier target to be shot down, even using rifles! In case one crashed, Germans and Resistance alike would be on the look-out for a baled-out pilot. It was essential to get rid of his parachute first, so he stood a better chance to be rescued. At night the sky was lit up by search-beams. When an aircraft was pin-pointed inside two or more crossing beams, a strong battery came into action, but they were still flying fairly high. We had a good view from the attic-window! It was as if they played the game: Catch me, if you can!

Although without heat, we lived in a nice, big house and had plenty to do. Before all else, each day somebody had to go to the farm across the road and buy a litre of milk. I didn't like it when it was my turn, because of the rats. I was petrified of them. They scattered in all directions as soon as I opened the back door. Whenever I had to cross the bridge towards the house, I would first pick up a stone and throw it on the path along the side of the house, to make sure they had gone. I wondered if they lived in the ditches ....or in the shed?!

My cousins had their daily music practice. Annamie played the violin and Bep the piano, like my aunt, whose ambition it was to form a trio when, in a year's time, Wim should be old enough to take up the cello. The teacher, who came once a week, was difficult to please and the lessons invariable ended in tears. I felt sorry for them. It was lovely when they played pieces together since we all liked hearing the sound of music.

Uncle Arie, who was in the merchant navy, liked to tinker with the radio, constantly trying to improve the reception of the receiver, which was hidden behind a switch in their bedroom. He had devised a method to supply electricity with a bicycle-dynamo. When it was time for a BBC broadcast we took it in turns to pedal the (upside-down) bike, whilst the others were on the look-out to give a signal in case a German needed the bathroom.

The banister got polished so often, it could function as a mirror!



The gas-bell at the Uitweg

We all lived in harmony together, trying hard to avoid misunderstandings. My uncle could be very grumpy at times. By a stroke of luck he happened to be on leave when the war broke out. He missed being at sea on his ship, but most of all he missed his tobacco. He even tried smoking dried oak-leaves! It cheered him up no end, when he and my father went scouring the neighbourhood for pieces of wood for the cooker. They enjoyed thinking up useful projects together. The low-lying garden was most unsuitable for growing vegetables, even if seeds had been available. It was quite boggy; hence the idea of peat-cutting was worth a try! It might have worked, if they had found a way of drying out the blocks, which was difficult in the middle of winter! Another time they were planning how to build a sort of kiln in the garden for baking bread, but first someone had to go out and try to get hold of some grain. The manual coffee-mill had proved to be an ideal item for grinding.

The food situation had gone from bad to worse. Most people looked gaunt and many started to die of hunger. We were not the only ones calling on farmers. They received an ever-increasing number of people asking for food and some of the farmers got fed up. Most wanted a lot of money, while others preferred goods, like linen or jewellery. You do anything when you are hungry!

So now and then Willy and Aunt Elisabeth went together and it could take them all day to cycle from one farm to the next. Each time they had to go further and further a field. They were only too happy to return with a small amount of potatoes and a little bag of grain. When my aunt started to feel unwell, uncle Arie helped out. My mother felt it as her duty to do her share and travelled as far as the farms across the big rivers. After all, they were not occupied anymore, so finding food might be a bit easier. Passing the German guards on the bridge presented no problems, they knew she would return. She managed to fill her bike's carrier-bags, but on her way back was searched by the guards and all her arduously gathered food got confiscated.

When my mother arrived home, empty-handed, she cried. Feeding a large family like ours was no easy task! Our piano in the Verhulststraat was sold to the farmer opposite. He was so pleased, that he made sure we were a little better off for milk and occasionally we got a few eggs. The milk for the soldiers was delivered every day and put on the work-top in the kitchen, a jug for each of them. It was as tempting for us as it was for the Prussian, minor aristocrat, Freiherr Von Sietzowitz. He jumped out of his skin when my aunt caught him spooning the cream from the others' jugs into his own. Only the day before, when he swept a path, had she told him that a broom was for sweeping not caressing a pretty girl! He grinned and didn't argue.

When it was bitterly cold we would share our beds and stay there all day, draping a blanket around our shoulders. We played games or read a book. Willy took the opportunity to study for her short-hand exams. The adults would take turns to get up and make us all something to eat. The sweet and sickly smell of sugar-beets would waft through to the upstairs.

Slavio

A successful return from a food trip to the farm

One of the billeted German soldiers with the boys
(John is sitting on his lap)

After the horrors of Kristall Nacht in 1938, tante Hans had fled from Nazi Germany and taken refuge with one of her relatives in Amsterdam, where she should be safe, or so she thought. When the persecution of Jews also started to take place in, meanwhile occupied, Holland, her relatives had to go into hiding and thus tante Hans ended up at aunt Elisabeth's as one of the family. We all loved this motherly, chubby lady in her 50's, who spoke Dutch with a strong German accent. She joined in with everything, but took charge of the cooking. It was remarkable what she was able to concoct with so very few provisions. Food was everybody's main topic of conversation when meeting with friends or neighbours, always happy to suggest some different ways of preparing anything from tulip-bulbs to stinging nettles. Instead of potatoes we had sugar-beets and however difficult it was to vary, either diced or mashed, they were still sugar-beets, which made poor Hans cry at every meal-time. Nobody liked to eat cattle fodder by choice, except when starving-hungry!

In the mornings everybody had to fulfil a task in the house, necessary or not. I could not see the point to polish furniture again when it had already been done the previous day, but the main purpose was to keep us busy and warm. Tante Hans was about to hang the washing on the line, when this arrogant, young German officer showed up. Only a few weeks ago he had scared everyone when he boasted that he was an expert in rounding up Jews and people in hiding. While she was pegging out the sanitary towels, he tried to be funny by asking her what they were. 'You mean, the caps for the cookery-school?' she retorted, sharply. With this, he had overstepped the mark and broken the billet's code of conduct. Being indiscreet was not tolerated and after lodging a complaint, he got posted elsewhere. We (and the soldiers) gave a sigh of relief to be rid of him at last. The rest of the others were less convinced of winning the war and behaved more amiably. They liked to talk about their families 'bei uns zu Hause' and Bauer spoke mostly of his concern about his farm's future in Bavaria, since his two sons were fighting with the army. I could not understand all they said, but when he was told that both had been killed, he cried bitterly. He threw his gun away and screamed, cursing Hitler for causing nothing but death and destruction. That needed no translation!

As daytime offered our best available light, the afternoons were the ideal opportunity for reading. It did not take long before many were absorbed in a book and downstairs fell silent. The boys often went upstairs to play, Old Opa Johannes had his face under his hanky, as usual, and before anything else, my aunt would nod off for her regular (exactly!) twenty minutes. On one of the tables was a jigsaw puzzle, at hand all the time and whoever fancied to add a bit, could assist tante Hans, who loved to do puzzles. So did I! Just before dusk, Aunt Elisabeth would play a few piano-duets with Bep, or she played well-known songs so we could join in. Uncle Arie was good at telling, increasingly better, stories about far-away lands and his sea-faring life. Fascinating! but really true?? We spent the evenings playing games by the dim light of improvised oil-lamps, a couple of water-filled jam-jars, with a wick on a layer of oil – Monopoly was the best. However, my father and Bep often plotted together to rob the bank and it was difficult to catch them out, because every game they tried a different system. It was not always as funny as it was meant to be!

Once in a while, weather permitted, we walked to the centre of Amsterdam where it was now very quiet, no more screeching of trams, fairly empty streets and the German vehicles being the only traffic. My father and my aunt knew a lot of the history and they guided us along with interesting stories about buildings and famous

people, which also appealed to us younger ones. When my father noticed we were flagging a little, he would say, "One more, just around that corner." Somehow he managed to take a route that led us on the way home. We also got more used to walking the distance to the Verhulststraat. My mother and I were spending a couple of nights there when, by chance, we met up with Willy. We knew nothing about her, her movements or what she was up to. She merely called in on her way back to the Uitweg.

Since the end of January the Germans had to allow the ships with grain and margarine from the Swedish Red Cross to dock in Holland, the bakeries to be supplied with electricity and the bread to be distributed among the shops in the city. With our coupons, Willy and I queued for hours for one loaf. We were in luck, but many had to go home without. I insisted that I carried it! It was pure white and tasted like cake!! The same day my mother got hold of two live eels! Unfortunately, when she tried to rinse them in the basin, they wriggled, found the plug-hole and escaped! I could not stop laughing. However hungry we might have been, eels put me off. The same, when my parents and I once had a meal with friends who served up meat, an unknown luxury. Many different animals were caught for food, but a cat was too much for me to swallow!

Aunt Elisabeth fell ill. The sores on her neck and legs, of a tubercular nature, got infected, causing open ulcers. The doctor ordered her to stay in bed and have plenty of milk and butter. From her bed in the living-room she could keep a watchful eye on what was going on around her. The farmer kindly supplied some extra milk, which she churned into butter in a small churn on her lap. There was such a shortage of everything. Soap, which did not lather and we called, air-soap. Pans were scoured with sand. Ersatz coffee, which was a warm drink, if nothing else. The water had been cut back to an hour a day. We had extra, because of the German 'guests', but who would take a bath in cold water! The sewing-machine in the attic was in constant use. Dresses were unpicked and combined to create new ones. We were growing in all directions and the hand-me-downs were exhausted. Jumpers were unravelled and the wool was washed and wound around a plank to stretch the thread and knitted up again. Aunt Elisabeth was kept fully occupied. Shoes were another problem. First the toes were cut off the upper part, but when your big toe started to stick out too far, your own design of wooden soles with webbing across, worked fairly well. In spite of thirteen hungry people living with fear and being deprived of so many essentials, as well as a war that did not seem to come to an end, we continued to live happily together. We learnt to be tolerant and to have a sense of humour. Since hunger had turned into starvation, a state of emergency had been declared. Something needed to be done soon! We tried our hardest to remain optimistic. It was almost April. At least the weather was improving and there were days we could go outside to play. Annamie and I would lay a purse in the middle of the road, attached to a thin thread and hide in the long grass. The moment somebody tried to pick it up, we pulled the string. It produced many laughs! We also tried out home-made nets on pond-dipping in the ditches.

My father started to complain about stomach pains and when the colour drained from his face, we knew it really hurt and he should see a doctor. Who could be trusted enough to register with? Having a price on his head, he thought it too risky and decided to retreat to the Verhulststraat instead, where he took to his bed. I went along to help my mother. One day when she couldn't get the majo to work, my

father crawled across the floor to help her. I was worried and talked to Mrs. Stoffels. She persuaded him to see her doctor, 'who is one of us'. He was kind and when he said, 'I have my own private clinic and I'll admit you now, for six weeks', we were relieved. He was in the right place and not far away from the room where we both stayed put, so we could visit him.

A feeling of restlessness hung in the air. Was something about to happen? News from London was a direct contradiction of the papers. The Germans began to doubt and most wanted to go home, others became more fanatical. Raids never ceased and one early morning our street was cordoned off by armed guards and house-to-house checks were made. We were petrified when they entered our house, banging and shouting with those horrible voices. We kept very quiet, trembling like a leaf. One young soldier just poked his head around our door and left. Afterwards we saw several people being driven off in trucks.

April 29th. Today we had all gathered in the Uitweg to witness a miracle. The Germans had been forced to allow the British to drop food-parcels on pre-arranged locations. We hoped to get a good view from the window in the attic. The planes flew over slowly and very low with their bellies open! We jumped up and down with excitement and a few tears were shed. This was the first of many deliveries of Operation Manna. The strong tins withstood the impact. They were collected before being allocated fairly. The contents were delicious, especially the egg-powder and the chocolate. As a token of thanks to the pilots, people spread the Dutch flag on their flat roofs, well out of sight from Germans.

May 4th. Back in our room, we were already in bed, when Mr Stoffels knocked on the door and blurted out that the peace- treaty was going to be signed at 8 am! Everyone got up and the couple in the front room invited us to look out of their window. We heard that a great number of students had been in hiding nearby and not been outside for years. Some could not wait and ignoring the curfew, ran into the street. Sadly, two were shot by a German on patrol.

Food being dropped by the British

May 5th 1945. The war was over and Holland was free! Our first thoughts were with my father and at 9 o'clock my mother and I stood on the doorstep of the clinic. It was too early and they refused to let us see him.

Everywhere people were dancing, embracing strangers and singing the national anthem. On the way to the Uitweg we met trucks full with disarmed soldiers, looking glum. Now it was their turn to be driven away! With great satisfaction, the yellow, German signposts were kicked down and wrapped in orange paper to be taken home for burning. From every house the flag was flying again, a mass of red, white and blue and with orange pennants. We had dyed sheets orange and they were made into dresses to wear to the city. I was very proud of my parachute-silk dress I had acquired from somewhere. We did not want to miss any of the festivities. De Dam has always been the heart of Amsterdam where the population congregates. We stood like sardines in a tin among pale, thin, but elated people. When the Canadian tanks arrived, covered with girls and flowers, the cheers were deafening. Suddenly shots were fired from a roof, where a few Germans were still present. The tanks closed immediately and we all fled into side-streets. It was a terrifying experience! The next day we watched a British parade and the Scots played the bag-pipes. They looked wonderful. We were told they didn't wear anything underneath their kilts, so we made sure we sat on the curb....Still none the wiser! Around every soldier was a crowd, kissing them and begging cigarettes. When I offered one a piece of my chocolate as a thank you, he gave me a packet of Lucky Strike, which infuriated the adults, but pleased my uncle!

The B.S., the Forces of the Interior, were rounding up members of the NSB. Girls, who had associated with Germans, were dragged into the street, tied to a chair to get their heads shaved and painted with red-lead. Hate without mercy!

Three weeks after the liberation, my father was discharged from hospital. He immediately made contact with the housing-department of the B.S. Our house was occupied by two families, but they promised to find us another one. We were put on the waiting-list. Meantime Willy had moved to Paleis Het Loo. She was one of 200 resistance workers invited by Queen Wilhelmina, to spend some time to recuperate in her palace. Willy never talked about her activities. Once, about 50 years later, did she mention a visit to Amersfoort prison, when she was part of a group posing as Germans, to get somebody out of there! We were allocated a house that had belonged to Jews, confiscated by Germans and re-possessed by the B.S. The original owners returned a year later and expected us to move out forthwith. The B.S. helped right away to sort it all out. Wim was back! We moved again. Opa returned to Bergen and tante Hans went to New York to her nephew. My uncle was back at sea and my aunt found a nice flat in Amsterdam. John and Fred were living with their parents again and Mr Van Oortmersen returned from the concentration camp, ill, but alive! We settled in this pleasant part of The Hague, trying to adjust to normal life. I have a Menorah to remind me of people who were not so lucky.....

My father and mother ready for a new start after the war

The Menorah

The family to whom it belonged told us to retrieve it out of their garden in the event they failed to return from Auschwitz.

POSTSCRIPT

One memory that has been suppressed all this time is now ready to be put into words and to add to my story.
On one of my many walks in Amsterdam with my father all pedestrians were stopped by soldiers. We were near a prison. In retaliation of an assassinated German, five young men came out and were lined up and executed. We had to watch. A vicar who looked at it from his window and praying for them was killed by a stray bullet.

Page 29
I should have elaborated on the train journey to Heilo with my father. Fancy my fear when he told me: Look, when soldiers enter the train and if I get arrested, pretend you don't know me, but make sure you take that suitcase with you!

Page 29
Then there is Fritz, the 4 year old, taken by the Gestapo. I should have mentioned Opa's feelings of despair, guilt and failure. How did he tell the parents!?
Though devastated the parents were so grateful for their safety and the other two boys, that they planted a tree for my family, in Jerusalem near the Holocaust museum.

Page 52
When I mentioned the crowd on the Dam and the Germans opening fire, 29 people were killed. One soldier was asked why he did it? His answer was : Why didn't you cheer like this when we arrived.

Page 52
The house we were allocated that had been confiscated by the Germans (from a Jewish family) had been used as a prison. When we lived in it a man came to the door to ask if his shoes were still there. He had escaped out of the window with the help of a sheet.

Page 7 Beware of the Tug-Bug!