

## My memories of World War II

The Germans were invading Holland when I was just three and little by little my parents made my brother Harry (who is seven years older) and me, aware of certain survival skills. I was to stay around the house, and not talk to the "mean German soldiers" as they could take me away and I would never see my Mommy and Daddy again. "What do they look like?" I asked, and my parents gave me some simple to understand ideas. That I had not really understood became obvious when I was playing alone in the nearby park one day. I remember looking at a well-dressed man with pointed, shiny shoes and wondered what a uniform looked like. And so, just to be sure, I asked: "Are you a German soldier?" upon which the man started to laugh and assured me he certainly was not! I still had no idea what a "mean German soldier" looked like.



The War broke out and in the beginning, life went on quite normal for me, although I am sure it must have horrified my parents. One day I noticed a huge world map had appeared on our living-room wall and with different coloured crayons my father carefully outlined the movements made by the invading army. I didn't quite understand it all, but the somber faces and hushed tones when the talk was on the War were giving me a feeling of insecurity. My parents were careful not to speak about their views on situations in my presence, since I could be approached and in my innocence pried to give away certain information or secrets. After the War, for instance, I learned the truth around a little, blond Jewish girl that was hiding next door to us and taken in by an elderly non-Jewish couple. She must have been of my age but I seldom got to see her, and if I did get a glimpse, or asked why she could not come to school or play with us, I was given some excuse about her being sickly, and kids being kids, I soon forgot about her existence.

It was only a 15-minute walk to school and when I went for the very first time, my mother took me to a room where all the children gathered and I felt very scared and deserted. I wanted to go to my mommy and when the teacher held me back, I cried even harder. I could see mom's face among

other mothers', peeking through the window in the door, and she was smiling, waved at me and suddenly she was gone. The first thing the teacher did was take us into the hall and show us the hooks to hang up our jackets. The hooks had a variety of animal tiles just above it, so you would remember where your coat hung. I chose one with a dog on it and never forgot where to find my coat. The Kindergarten class was very large with 42 children attending. I guess I must not have behaved well one day as I remember the teacher being angry and telling me to step onto the long, narrow bench along the wall and stay there till all the other children had left the room. I stood there crying until she told me to come down and I was allowed to join the class again. If the sirens would go off warning us of the nearing of enemy planes, the teacher told us to hide under our desks. I, of course and the



other children became extremely nervous, as we did not realize what was going on, just the fright of the sirens telling us to go for cover.

The Kindergarten class. I am sitting 7<sup>th</sup> from left, in second row from the back, in "Navy" blouse, next to the dark-skinned boy.

The winters became extremely cold, and a heavy snowfall covered the streets and in order to save on burning the vastly diminishing coal in the bin outside, we just had the heat on for a couple of hours at night after my dad came home from work, when we would all gather around the potbellied stove in the living room and he would read the newspaper or talk with us. My mother would wait until it was almost dark and you could hardly see anything before turning on the light, as electricity became very expensive. She kept urging: "Turn off the light" and "Close the door, you are letting in the cold and the heat will escape!" Our townhouse only had one bedroom and a living room, kitchen, and W.C. (water closet) and for a family of four, it could get pretty cramped. We all slept in the same bedroom.

Jews were now ordered to wear a yellow Star on their coats for recognition. My girlfriend Erna's father was a Jew and a nice man; he was married to a blond, good looking gentile woman, so he was the only one having to wear the Star. He seldom went out of the house and was scared to be found out, or ratted on by others. When I came to her home, he was always upstairs. Erna and I have been friends since we were little and most times came to each other's house to read, as both seemed very comfortable with each other, and we both loved reading. After walking home from school and chatting, I can remember both of us reading and sitting around the potbellied stove, and after a while, she would look up at the clock on the mantle, saying, "Well I better go home now, it is time for dinner", neither one of us having said one word. We have remained friends through the years and I visit her when I am in Holland, and she visited me for three weeks in 2005.

My father lost his job during the war and became unemployed; however, he was very creative in making some money. One time he sold hand-painted glass-vases and the business was quite brisk, until women came back, telling him that as soon as they filled one up with water, the paint disappeared since it was not waterproof! He tried his hands on selling fish, however, he purchased a bad batch and the fish soon "smelled to high heaven" and could not be sold. He was able to get a job with the government inspecting grain on ships that came into the harbours. One day he took me out to "help" him and told me to put on my high rubber boots. I found it very odd, after all it was summer, and I objected, but dad showed he was also wearing his boots, and that made me feel a bit better. We soon came to the harbour where we walked around the deeply laden grain vessels and once in a while dad would take a handful of grain, sniff it and walk on, making sure the grain was in perfect condition. He jumped into a mountain of grain at one point before we were leaving and coaxed me to join him. He took a few more samples and walked around. I could feel the grain filling up in my boots and was about to empty them, when dad asked me to hurry saying we had no time for this right now, as we would miss the streetcar to go home. I felt real uncomfortable with all the grain sloshing in my boots and couldn't wait to take them off when I came home. Dad helped me empty my boots and I saw him save the grain in a bag. Later-on I heard that my mom would grind that grain in the coffee mill to later bake some bread, which we shared with the neighbours. It had been a day with a "purpose!"

Food, as well as coal or wood to burn in the stove for heat, was now in short supply and the winter, which had come with a vengeance didn't make it any easier, with storms and snow every day. Money was available to buy products, but the products were not available. Money was worthless and the only thing that would be used for trade was gold or silver. My mom had heard that farmers would trade milk for silver or gold. The farms were a good two hours away by bike and it was pretty tricky with the Germans everywhere not to get stopped; besides you wouldn't know where they might take you, if they didn't believe your story. The only bike we owned was an old dilapidated men's bike that had no tires and was pretty rusty and wobbly in use. The tires were full of holes so my dad cut a wheel-length part off a water hose, strung it around the wheel and closed it with a clamp. Because it had no air in the "tire", and was made of thick rubber, biking for a long time was very hard and extremely tiring. My mother took the bike one day and came back home with a pail of milk swinging from her steering wheel. She had exchanged her wedding band for the pail of milk. It was only years later, on their 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary that my dad presented her with a new wedding band, and this time it had diamonds in it! She must have missed the ring tremendously, yet never complained. After the water hose "tires" fell apart, we were left to go on our bikes without tires at all, being careful not to get into a bicycle-Razzia (raid) where the Germans could take our only mode of transportation.

Radios were now not allowed and had to be handed in at a center. If anyone were caught with an illegal radio, they would be shot on the spot. People started to find all sorts of ways to listen to small radios for the latest news, but had to be careful to trust who could join or give the information to. An underground network of people evolved who distributed news of where the Germans were or Jews were hiding and needed crucial food supplies delivered to. I only heard about this later as I personally was too young to have been aware of this.

Henk lived down the street and his father and mother were very poor and sickly. He was in his late teens and a tall, skinny guy, with longish black hair, that bounced up and down with his long, sweeping strides. Whenever my mother had been able to trade something for food and we would have enough for one more, Henk would be asked for dinner. He was very shy, had

nothing much to say and just ate. After finishing his dinner, he would run his finger alongside his plate not to miss a spot of food. At the end of the meal he would ask, "Can I lick out the pot please?" and he would be given the pot, while my brother looked at me and we both giggled, and he continued as if he had not heard.

One day coming home from school, I noticed an army truck at the end of our street and German soldiers with rifles jumped out from the back. They proceeded to a house, ran up the stairs with their rifles and shouted "Aus steigen! Aus steigen!" (*get out! get out!*) And out came a Jewish family, a man, woman and three children followed by the Germans who hurriedly poked them in their backs with the rifles and shouted threats; they all climbed into the truck and we never saw them again. I heard from my parents that the Germans were picking up Jewish people as well as other men, and send them on trains to Germany to labour camps. I saw long rows of men marching during a "Razzia" (Raid), on the main street (Middenweg) and some women running alongside to keep up with the marching men, to try and seek out their loved ones. When the women found their loved one, they would scream and cry and tried to run along for miles, not knowing where their men were going. It was heartbreaking to see all this going on.

To try and prevent my father or brother from being picked up during those "Razzias", my parents fixed up a little hiding place. In the kitchen floor was a trapdoor (hatch) and the Dutch knew of their existence, but the Germans did not, as this was covered over with our kitchen rug. The hiding place was very shallow and damp and not deep enough to stand up in, just to lie down. Wooden planks were put down and a blanket, in case it was needed. A few times on short notice I remember my brother having to quickly hide when the word "Razzia" was heard and Germans would storm through the streets and houses picking up men.

Coal for heating the house was running very low and people cut down whatever would burn. Unlawfully, from trees (which were cut down in the middle of the night) to fences, anything that would provide heat. The railroad beams were disappearing and the Germans warned anyone taking these beams would be shot. Sometimes we could find coal right along the railway lines and if we were lucky we could walk home with a basket if it was not stolen out of our hands by boys that were older.

Sirens were placed on top of the roofs to warn us of enemy planes nearing our city. They would sound their awful howling noise of danger approaching and some dogs would sit in the middle of the street and howl right along with the sirens. Most attacks happened at night and flattened whole districts in the city. Our suburb was spared and we knew in the morning we could go hunting for shrapnel or parts of grenades. One day a live grenade was found by a teenaged boy and not knowing the danger, he tried to take it apart, whereby he lost one eye and part of his hand, when the grenade blew up. He was running home bleeding and we all ran after him to try and offer some help.

The Red Cross was helping out with the distribution of food parcels being dropped out of the planes, we were SOOO hungry. If we got word that a plane would come over with a new supply we all ran as fast as we could and tried to catch something. My father had a part in the distribution of food to people, and at times we were afraid if he had to work late that he would be picked up by the Germans, as there were curfews in place and he had to be home before eight p.m. In the school's auditorium a "Soup Kitchen" was set up where we could eat what was available at the time. Sometimes we had vegetables and potatoes but most often they served soup. At one time they were serving potato-peel soup and I almost lost the meal before going home, my stomach not enjoying it much. Most of the food was unavailable but my parents received coupons per month for coffee, tea, sugar or butter and bread. Everything was rationed.

My dad had bought me some wooden shoes (klompen) as he could not repair my old leather shoes any longer and we couldn't buy new ones. Stepping through the snow, it would build up on the bottom of the shoe and all of a sudden it broke the top off. That left me without shoes and I had to walk with my dad's wooden shoes filled with straw, to make them smaller, but they were toasty warm.

School went on as normal as it could with the interruptions of the sirens and the lack of things to work with. My dad had learned that we would be able to eat the tulip bulbs and my mom fried some for us to eat. Actually they tasted okay to me; I guess if you are hungry you eat anything. Other things like sugar was unavailable and my mom would cook sugar beets

for hours until a thick sludge was left which could be substituted. Everyone was feeling the hunger and the lack of clothes. We dressed as best as we could and handed down to friends and neighbour what we had outgrown. That we were unable to eat nutritious foods showed up in all sorts of illnesses and many people suffered and eventually died.

At times my dad was lucky with the grain and came home with some in his pockets as well. It created a fear all around of being found out by neighbours who could inform on us, or being picked up by the police. Dad and mom shared with the real sick neighbours and once sent me over to my next door neighbour who was not able to eat anymore. His stomach was swollen so very badly and while I prompted him to eat and sitting at his bed site, he just smiled and said he just couldn't, and a few weeks later died.

Because of many illnesses I had to miss most of the first grade and have a tonsillectomy at the hospital. It was very scary to be left alone in a hospital as my parents were told it would be better for me if they did not visit. I was strapped down onto a stretcher and two people had to walk me down to the operating room in the basement through narrow, dark stairways. Talk about being frightened! My mom only came once after I had been operated and gave me a little calendar to X out the days until I could come home. It was an experience I never forgot! It was difficult to see my schoolmates go on to the next grade (Two) and I had to re-do the first grade, and be called dumb by my classmates", which left a mark on me for years after.

Trams didn't go anymore, and we had to walk everywhere for hours. My aunt Marie (mom's sister) her husband and son, lived in the center of Amsterdam and we often walked for hours to see them. She had offered to look after my grandmother who was elderly and frail and it became a place where family would often meet. My little legs were so very tired by the time we got to her place, and my brother who was seven years older, was just as tired, but didn't admit to it. To pass the time walking to their place, we would give curtains in the windows we passed a grade. A real pretty home had curtains which were especially beautiful and was given an 8 or a 9. Soon my brother grew tired of the game and quit and we walked in silence.

We were told the War was over quite a number of times, and then we would be happy, only to find that someone had not heard right and people got into trouble by jeering at the Germans.

When the American and Canadian soldiers entered Amsterdam, their tanks and trucks rumbling in, I was sitting on the Diemen-bridge, the entrance to Amsterdam, with a bunch of older kids. One American picked me up and put me in the truck. Oh, what an exciting this time was, to know we were finally freed; everyone was happy and celebrating the end of the War. The truck slowly driving on, I suddenly noticed how far we were going from home and started to wonder how to get back as there were no streetcars going, and wanted off the truck. One soldier gave me a slice of the whitest bread I had ever seen with red jam on it! I was going to save it and bring it home, but ate it on my way back. It tasted so wonderful and sweet! There was dancing in the streets and parties all over Amsterdam. After five years, the War had finally ended and I was nine years old then. A time of adjustments and of shortages remained for years.



Razzia (Raid) Men picked up to go to Germany.





Food parcels dropping from planes for the hungry Dutch people

### OUR LIBERATORS

In the background Betondorp, where I grew up.

Uit het boek: J.F. Reurekas, Diemen 1940-1945, Stichting Uitgeverij Noord-Holland, in samenwerking met de gemeente Diemen, 1985. Foto: L.Bruins

De Bevrijding - Op de achtergrond het Betondorp



The happy Dutch on the Diemen bridge welcoming our liberators entering Amsterdam, I was among them.

#### Note:

I realized that this story is also a part of my life, and needed to be told. Deep and dark emotions of a difficult time that had remained buried deep inside me, now had to surface. This War took my carefree youth and put an everlasting shadow over my life. Thank heavens our family came through this period physically unharmed, although some emotional scars exist to this day. Thank heavens for the Canadian, British and American Liberators.

#### Note 2:

Of Razzias (Raids) I have to explain that any adult male could be picked up and sent to Germany. There they would do hard labour, digging trenches and other related hard work. Men would be ordered to leave all their belongings at the SS "office", get their heads shaved, showered and clothed in hand-me-downs and shoes that were worn out and from prisoners that had died. Men who couldn't keep up with the heavy work would often be shot on the spot. Food consisted out of one bowl of watery soup and 1 slice of bread per day and in some camps cannibalism had broken out. Hundreds of thousands died in gas chambers in the concentration camps of Dachau, Auschwitz and Mauthausen.