

Life at Home During Five Years of War (1940-1945)

On May 9, 1940 my Mother came home from a dentist appointment in a small town with the name of Maassluis. This town is very close to the North Sea where the river Maas has it's beginning and is one of the three rivers that flow across Holland into Germany. Every river that has it's beginning from the sea or from a large lake has a "sluis"(sluice). A sluis locks the water out from the sea. In the dictionary they talk about a lock gate, a lock beam, lock chamber and a flood -gate. If a dike was breaking with a heavy storm and much rain, there would a flood. But if nothing was extreme a "sluice" could regulate the water very precisely. Even when we had rain for days, our canals and ditches were never over flowing.

I remember that in 1953 there was a terrible flood in Holland. We heard it on the news while we where driving to church on a Sunday morning in February. All our family from both of us were living very close to where the dike broke and 2000 people had drowned already. I did not hear a word of what was said in the service. I am sure I was not the only one. Every one in church was in that same uncertainty as we were. We all kept on trying to reach Holland but none of us immigrants could get through. The next day we heard from home that all was well with them. I cannot remember that I have ever been so worried about our loved ones then during that flood.

This was a little history on one event that takes place more often, when you always live in Holland. It is no wonder that Holland goes often by the name "The Netherlands." Holland is below the "water spiegel" or sea level.

Mom was very upset with what she saw and heard on her trip by bus and at the dentist as well. She shared at supertime that "every one was talking of war, people were standing in clusters in the streets, just talking about it." My brother, who was in his second year in a University in the city of Delft, spoke first and said "Mom, in Delft every one talks about it too the last weeks and I am afraid that there will be war very soon and here as well." His words were like a dark cloud, all at once, hovering over us. We had a very quiet meal that evening and very different from our usual sharing. Yet we all knew that we were thinking about the same subject and trying to comprehend what war would be like.

Being tired and in my growing years, (I just had my fifteenth birthday) I fell asleep immediately after this scary end of the day, until I woke up suddenly

at four o'clock in the morning. There was loud talking down stairs, which I never heard before. Father and two of my brothers always got up at that time but we never noticed. They had to milk our 40 cows before 6 o'clock, so the milk would be strained and ready for the milk truck. This time there were more awake and all at once it dawned on me that "war" had begun. I heard airplanes coming over. Not just one as often happened, but several ones, all flying very low and then I heard shooting. My older sisters woke up as well and told me to dress quickly and go downstairs.

When I came downstairs everyone was in the living room. Some were going from window to window watching the planes coming. We had tall trees around our house. Soldiers were hanging out the windows of these ugly black planes, searching the surroundings of our farm. This went on for at least one hour. After that noise stopped Dad went out with my brothers to gather the cows for milking. We were all tense and shaky and I am sure Mom and Dad were as well but they were calm and told us all what our task was. We followed Dad and the boys with our eyes as they gathered the cows. Many were in ditches because of the low flying aircraft. Dad had expected this already. It took hours before all the cows were pulled out and came to rest. Needless to say that there was only half the milk then normal and no truck came to pick up the milk. After the second milking we kept the cows in a closed area close to home. Since the milk was not picked up, Dad and Mom decided to start making butter and cheese again, as they did during the First World War in 1914- 1918.

The milk was brought to the cellar in 30-liter milk coolers. There were no covers on these coolers so that the cream could be removed and cheese made from the 2% skim milk, if so desired.

In our cellar was a running well that filled a 5 foot deep cement pit constantly with very cold water, to cool the milk. The pit was roughly 10 feet long and 4 feet wide. This was the only cooling system there was on the farm to keep the second milking fresh until the next morning. The milk truck came only once, to pick up the milk and that was early morning, except when the war started.

The next morning the milk was very cold and a thick layer of cream was on top of the milk. It was Mom's job to skim most of it off and put it in the churn with some buttermilk where it would ferment in 20 hours. The next day it was ready to make butter from. It was done with a wooden (home

made) plunger with a circle of one inch whole in it, until we were blest with electricity in 1943. It took one hour until the butter was ready to be separated from the buttermilk. The butter was washed in cold water a few times until all buttermilk taste was removed. This was not the end of all the work but only the beginning! The creamed milk was carried from the cellar again, (about 200 liter) to make room for the coolers with fresh milk. The almost skimmed milk was now to be warmed to 32 C degrees temperature. This was a long process, because all the milk had to have the same temperature when the rennet was added, which separated the milk in whey and little chunks of cheese. It had to be stirred several times during that process. I have forgotten how long it took before we could make the cheese. First we poured this mixture on cheesecloths, which let all the whey go through (which was a treat for the pigs, mixed with flour). We needed several clean cloths because when the little holes got plugged up we needed dry ones again. When all the whey was carried out and all the cheese was gathered in a wooden tub, Dad would add salt, some spices or seeds, and mixed it thoroughly. Anise seed was one of them (komijnekaas). He mixed it thoroughly and filled three round cheese vats. Then he put the fitted wooden covers on them and a heavy stone on each to press out the last whey. Toward evening Dad took three clean cloths again, spread them out to empty the three cheeses on them very carefully, so that none would break. Then he put the cheese back in the vats and folded the clean cloth nicely on top again. This was done twice a day with a lighter stone on them, for a few days until the cheese was solid. After that they had to dry in a cool, dark place for a few weeks, only to be turned once a day!

After all this making cheese and butter was finished, there were many coolers, milk pails and other utensils to be cleaned, plus cheese cloths to be washed. During these days there was not enough time to keep our house clean, three meals a day for the fourteen of us and baking bread and doing laundry, still by hand for the first two years of war yet, kept Mom and I always out of mischief!

We realized that, because of the war, there was chaos on every dairy farm. No doubt in most if not all families there were interruptions in one way or another and we had to make the best of it. We did this every day, for ten days and than the milk truck came again. We were told how much milk we had to deliver each day and never sold more then we had too because people did not have enough to eat when the coupon system was organized,

and that came very soon. It meant that many came to the farms for milk, eggs, or whatever was available.

Holland capitulated after five days of fierce fighting. Dad's brother came to tell us that there was "peace" again. We were all inside as it was our teatime. When my Uncle said that there was peace again, my student brother Kees, lost his cool and blurted out "peace!" "We are all slaves from now on until we are rescued".

When Uncle had left, Mom said to him, "Kees, you know more about the political situation than your Uncle." And that wisdom brought the right atmosphere back in our family. Many adjustments had to be made in these first days.

We all had to learn to function in a different world with often unexpected happenings that we had no control over. These first 5 days still stand out, for the fear of the unknown and the chaos it brought in many lives.

When the war began our whole family was still home. My oldest sister was 25 years old and our baby sister was almost 7 years. I was the seventh child in the family, flanked by four older brothers and four younger brothers. My oldest sister was engaged the year before, in 1939 when her "husband to be" was called in the army, during that year of mobilization. Of course we were aware of this but as we had heard from Dad and Mom that Holland stayed free during the First World War, most of us unconsciously, maybe, were counting on that again. When Mom and Dad got married in April 1914, they could hear the noise from cannon - shots in Belgium. It must have brought a cloud over their happy day. For sure if you compare that war threat, with a honeymoon!

When those first five days were over, a time of mourning set in. I never heard how many soldiers and others lost their lives during those five days but every family was grieving for someone they knew. Our Queen and her whole Royal family had fled to England and those who had betrayed our land took over. Our family was worried about my sister's boyfriend Jan. It took a while before we heard that he was alive. It was the same with Andrew Moerman. It took a couple of weeks before he came home as well. It took a long time before we some how, got used to all these different strain and stresses. The routine in our household was disturbed as well.

What bothered me most was, that I always had to make an effort to be alert, tired or not. Doors always had to be locked in the daytime as well as at night. As soon as I saw a soldier or a stranger for that matter, I had to warn those who were in “hiding.” When all were in a safe place, I could open the doors to let the soldiers in who were banging on the doors most of the time. Sometimes they were mad. You never knew what to expect. If there was one fanatic in the bunch I was scared, but if they had no “boss” with them, (a corporal or sergeant) I was not pushed around. It happened only once in these five years. I use the word fanatic only to show, that every soldier was kept in line by one who was on fire, for the purpose they were fighting for. To be honest, I felt sorry for these men, especially after I saw two German soldiers crying, when we were singing on a Sunday evening around the organ. They both had a baby, one was born just before the father, Willey, was drafted and the other soldier’s baby was born six months after he had left. This twenty two year old father had never seen his baby because he drowned with thousands of soldiers on the way to England.

In November 1943, we were told to make room for four soldiers. They picked out the barn with a cement floor to live in. When every thing was put outside, they unloaded their beds and other things, to keep house. To have them living on our own yard was an added strain for us to keep our “hiding people” out of sight. Mom invited them on Saturday and Sunday evening to visit with us for a few hours. We were taught not to hate our enemies. The soldiers were sent and had to obey, or else loose their lives because of their disobedience.

The same happened to most of the farmers in the two provinces in North and South Holland who were living like us, close to the coast of the North Sea. These soldiers were being made ready to cross the North Sea to invade England when their boats were torpedoed and they all lost their lives. I have no words to describe how cruel war is but if you get to know soldiers in your own home for a few months, you get a taste of their hurts and pain. When they left at our bedtime, they saluted Mom and said “Danke schoon, frouwlyn!”

Where we lived, the North Sea was only 17 miles wide as we were told by the English radio station “Oranje.” We had heard about the plans of this crossing already but they gave the news of what was in the making for us in advance. My brother Kees went faithfully “underground” every evening at

eight o'clock, to listen to the News. I know that everything was not told to us as Dad protected us by screening the news first, before we heard it.

We were never told that Dad had hidden Stan guns, ammunition and an army truck in different haystacks on our yard. I cannot tell you how thankful I am, first of all for the Lord's protection of course, but also for the way Dad protected us by not telling us more than we needed to know. My brother Kees understood this best and decided to go to Berlin to work in the war factories. He was told to do so many months before, but refused to go and went into hiding instead. He had been doing this for a long time, but he told us that he could not stand it any longer. Later I understood that he left mainly to protect Dad because if he had been found in our home, Dad would have been killed right on the spot. It happened many times in these years.

My brother went to Berlin for at least one year and then was hiding again in our home until the end of the war. Three times his belongings were burned, through constant bombing. We had pre-arranged with him that he would write the opposite of the truth. That way we knew what he needed most. When he lost everything he wrote, "I have more clothing than I ever had before." This way Mom could send things as soon as possible. His censored letters always reached us. When he lost everything for the third time, he walked at midnight to the train station in Berlin. He saw a train that was heading for Amsterdam, crawled in a tool drawer of a wagon and arrived with frozen feet in Amsterdam. It was still dark but he received the strength to climb the eight-foot high fence with several strings of barbed wire on top, which was surrounding the train station. He made it safely over the fence, his clothing torn from the barbed wire and many sore spots on his body. He walked to the lights of a busy highway in that cold winter, in his ripped clothing and on frozen feet. In the early morning another miracle happened, when my brother reached a highway, an elderly man stopped and brought him to Delft. The first thing this man said to Kees, "Young man do you know that you are in great danger?" He answered "Sir, I have been for a year in great danger and now I am on my way home." This whole trip was one BIG miracle!

I will never forget the moment when my brother Klaas came home to tell that he had news about Kees. We had not heard from him for a couple of weeks and I thought that he had died. My brother saw that I did not understand what he was saying and took me outside. Then he told me every

thing in detail about his trip and that he was coming home tonight when it was dark. Afterwards he went to tell Dad and Mom the good news and all the others except the ones who were in school yet. It was in the early spring of 1943 that Kees came home again. I cannot describe what relief it brought to us that he was not facing these fearful days and nights any more.

Most of the evenings as soon as it was getting dark, many airplanes from England came over our farm on their way to Germany. They were flying high but a lot of shooting accompanied them from the satellites which were about one and two miles away from our home. It took two hours most of the time before the droning sound of the airplanes stopped. There was only a quiet evening when there was a heavy fog. That was good news for all of us and I am sure to the airforce in England as well.

If there was a light fog, the droning sound of the planes came later in the evening. It made a difference with a full moon as well. Of course this was just observations based on what we saw and heard. But it made us all relax just to think that people could sleep and were not tortured with fear. We never talked about our fears, except to the Lord, but we never got used to these things and that was confirmed when my brother came home. He told me this year yet, (2003) that he had nightmares when Europe became restless. He was again reminded of the war.

Besides my brother we were also hiding the head of Police from the city of Nijmegen. He had saved the lives of two Jews. Someone reported this and he was put in jail, waiting to get the bullet. The under ground forces rescued him and brought him to our farm. He was hiding in our “upper room” for more then two years. I will be proud of my Dad’s courage as long as I live and can remember, and the same of my dear husband’s courage because he too has risked his life for others; Many times as well.

We also hid a German soldier whose bakery was built on Dutch soil and his house on German soil. He was called to be a soldier and fight the people who bought his bread! This man was a German by birth, 46 years old and he never dreamed that he would ever have to serve in the German army. He could not do this, but he did obey, but fled as soon as he saw his way clear. He found a safe address in Rotterdam. “It happened to be” a brother of our pastor in Schipluiden. It was a miracle from beginning to end, that this man came to live in our home in safety for more then two years.

We lived three miles away from our town, on a farm and our lane was one KM off the highway. We gave this man the name "Hein." This was a perfect German name and he became Dad's hired man, officially. My "boy friend," John, was in the under ground forces already and knew where to go for illegal papers for Hein. I have watched him many times when German soldiers were checking his papers on our yard, or in our home for that matter. My cry to God was always, that God would save his and Dad's life; And He did, again and again.

In an emergency situation, when a home became a spot light for the German soldiers, we took a pilot from New York into our home. He was shot down above our field and was cared for, for several months, by people who lived about two km behind Dad's property. Something had leaked out and all that was suspicious was to be removed. First of course, people who were hiding. I found that one of the most dangerous jobs. When he had arrived I was at ease again, even though we all realized that we were in more danger than before.

We told our little brothers and sister that this man was deaf and dumb. We did not speak to him during our meals and he knew why. When he came from the "upper room" in the evening, when all our little ones were in bed, we would try to have some conversation with him, Our American guest stayed with us until it was bedtime for all of us. Of course all the doors were locked and every window was darkened, as we were told to do for a long time already. Kees was our translator and we all could ask questions. Mom would ask if he wanted coffee, tea or hot chocolate to drink. Soon she began to understand what he liked best and we all picked up a few words and thought that it was fun to have him.

The people who lived with us for a while kept contact with our family for years. They were sent anniversary and wedding cards from our family and the pilot came over for Dad and Mom's Fortieth wedding anniversary and also the Police of Nijmegen came. I did not see these people again as we had emigrated six years before that time. The pilot was with us for about two months, but the other two men lived with us for more then two years, until the war was over.

On March 10, 1943 my Mom's birthday was celebrated and one of our visitors was her brother, Klaas. He was living on the farm where Mom was born and told his sad story that they had to leave the farm. His 40 cows he

had brought to a neighbor already, who did not have to move. “But we as a family have no place to go,” he said. I felt so sorry for him. He did not know what to do. Then I heard Mom say “Klaas, you come here and live with us.” “But you are with 15 people already, do you have room for all seven of us”, my Uncle said. “I am sure that it can be worked out, Mom assured him. You can come today!” I have never seen a man so thankful, and I have nothing but very good memories of those two years and two months that they were with us. I have nothing but admiration for Mom! Where there is a will, there is a way, was her motto and she lived it! Does war make heroes? Yes, but not only soldiers become heroes but also Moms and Dads! I have lived with them!

The next day the family came with a big truck, loaded with tables, chairs, beds and all they needed daily. Mom had discussed everything with her brother and knew where things had to go. The five children, ages 12 to 2 years, were all going to sleep upstairs in our girls department. In the front part of our big sleeping quarters was a separate bedroom made for my Uncle and Aunt in the next few days. There was plenty of room for everyone and for everything. For mealtimes in the living room their big table was added so that we all could sit around these tables; our people in hiding as well. My Aunt took the forced moving from their farm as a terrible experience. I felt sorry for her. Uncle Klaas told her often that this time would pass too, but she could not see the end of the tunnel they were in. And she was right in that there was no guarantee of anything. There was only uncertainty at that time yet. We all had these feelings during these years but we were blessed that we were all together in our own home yet.

We soon were organized with 23 people around our tables every day. We needed to prepare a lot of food but with the three of us, our meals were always ready at 7:30, 12:30 and 6 o'clock. My Uncle stayed a couple of months longer than the three men who were living with us these years. Their farm had been under water so long, that it was mid summer 1945, before everything was dry and their house inhabitable. It needed a lot of repair and paint before the family could move in their own home again.

I wonder if I have given a correct picture as far as our life at home is concerned. It was so different during these five years. There was so much activity from four in the morning to ten o'clock at night that there was very little time to talk with each other. It was a good thing that we had a coffee break in the morning and a tea break in the afternoon. But during the war

we had to stay alert and keep our doors locked. It was not a relaxed time like it used to be. It was often an overview of all the work that was done and what still needed to be done that day. The only time I can remember that we went at a slower pace was in the evenings when it was very cold in mid winter. Tuesday evenings my brothers went to Bible study and Friday evenings to their youth group. My Dad was one evening gone every week, either to a school board meeting or a church board meeting and often to fire insurance meetings but that was during the day. Dad has been for 25 years president of the fire insurance organization and was gone many times after thunderstorms. This was to evaluate the loss when a barn burned down or a cow was killed in the field by lightning. Dad and one other of the board had to set the price that the cow or building was worth.

I asked my youngest brother last summer if he remembered Dad doing all these things, when I phoned him for his birthday. "I sure do, he said, I have just retired from doing Dad's job for 30 years!" I also heard that this brother was asked to take Dads place as an elder, three years in and one year out. It is amazing how much you still miss from your home life, even if you have regular contact with all of them. I had never known that my brother, Gerard, did all this work that Dad used to do.

When we immigrated in 1948, I started out with my letter writing every week the first two years to my home. Mom took the letters every Sunday to Mom Moerman, who sat in the next pew. When Jack was born, I weaned them slowly to every other week. I kept this up until Dad and Mom both had passed away (in 1964 & 1986.) Besides the regular letters, we wrote birthday letters to all our brothers and sisters. Dad did write to his four sisters, which I do now since Dad has left us, plus our eleven in the Van Leeuwen family. We had started with our Christmas letter writing in 1988 when Dad retired from his active ministry.

As I have read this brief account of these five years of war over a few times I feel that I did not tell much how all this work, fear and responsibilities rubbed off on me as a teenager. To put an answer in one sentence: Our home with Father still singing while milking and a Mother who laughing just as much as she talked, and reading God's Word and their prayers with every meal, was the foundation of our home. The older my four brothers, two sisters and I myself get, the more we all realize how blessed we were. To repeat the words of my brother, "Corrie, we did not know any better then always to work; it was the only way to survive". We only relaxed on

winter evenings with playing games (Checkers, Dominos and Sorry) and reading a book from the library. And of course with Mom's hot chocolate, as we were singing around the organ on Saturday and Sunday evenings. And so it was. Now it is a happy memory and more than that, it even gives us joy and strength to live our golden years!

In 1939 I went to a funeral for the first time my life. My Opa, (Mom's Dad) died the year before the war broke out. Oma was thankful that he died before the war began because Opa was very depressed his last five years and there was no help for that in those days. I found it very difficult to cope with death. It took many years before I could say something to the bereaved and that I did not lay awake before I had to go to a funeral. It was when my husband went to be a Shepherd full time, that the Lord lifted me over this difficulty of not being able to identify with those who were grieving. To me, that was a gift in itself and also a sign from the Lord that we were called to do this work. I knew that Dad longed to be pastor when he was a teenager, and I still find it special that our Doctor said to him in spring 1953 "John, you either become a pastor OR a farmer, you cannot do both". I was apprehensive to say the least or even alarmed at the prospect of living in a parsonage. I was not looking against washing floors for three afternoons per week, to put food on the table, but I was scared that I could not be of help to Dad, as I did on the farm. I was glad that there was an opportunity to study for him. And all these feelings did not just go on the back burner but faded away! It did stick up it's ugly head in full force for a while when Dad graduated, but Dad, in his calm reassuring voice said again, that I could help him in church work just as well as I did before on the farm. "Mom, just love the people as you always did." And that love for all people came from the Lord and we both have enjoyed the work He gave us, to the full.

Dad came in my life in the spring of 1943 when the war years became the most difficult. Now as I see this in black and white, I realize that this was 60 years ago this spring. I remember so many details yet. When he came to our home (officially) he was wearing a blue suit, almost matching the color of his eyes. I had heard his voice several times before, over the years when he came to rehearse with other young people a play, that took three hours, to be played in our church during early spring. That first evening I was reminded of a poem we learned in grade four about the eyes that "they are the mirrors of the soul." I also thought of Mom's advice, "when you look in the boy's eyes, you can read and see how clean their thoughts are." And I must have done this because I *saw* and I knew

that they were blue! And respect was also born that evening for this twenty-year-old young man.

These last two years of the war we never made plans to go to meetings or friends or family for that matter. The truth was that my boyfriend, John, seldom slept in his own bed in the years 1943-1945.

It might sound risky to you to have a friend like that and it was difficult at times. I knew, and so did Mom and Dad, that John was in the underground forces and that meant that he could be caught any time when they were out at night. Two nights per week they were out to rescue people or in the sabotage business. My Dad knew all about what was happening on our farm. One day one of my brothers came inside, all upset, telling Dad that one of our big sows was stolen. Dad played his part beautifully by rising quickly to see what had happened. He knew all about this because I was there when Dad and John were discussing the hunger problem even in our small town. Dad promised to donate the next pig for the "soup kitchen", as it was called. Many farmers did the donating of food. Whatever you were able to give you passed on during that time. You just had to help to keep each other alive but Dad never talked about it he just lived it. Neither did he speak about hiding things in our hayloft and haystack, or hiding people in your home, for that matter. It could cost your life. It could only add more danger to yourself and others if you talked. In this setting our love for each other was growing, in spite of uncertainty and all the rumors of the war which were floating around.

I have always seen it as a miracle that we had five years of engagement even though we never celebrated it until April 20, 1945 when our freedom was almost signed (on May 5) and the soldiers were packing to leave our land. We had a few soldiers living on our yard as well for several months and never noticed that Mom and Dad saw this as a problem. They did not ignore them or warn us to be more careful, they only said: "They are people too and they are sent, if they disobey they will be killed." I have admired my parents how they identified with them in spite of the language barrier. Of course we had to be more careful (if that was possible). We never had any trouble in these years. There was no disruption in our family because they lived so close. We had already learned to be careful. If anything was obvious, it was that a few soldiers showed thankfulness for the way we accepted the fact that they had to live on our farm. These were the ones who came inside on Mom's invitation in the evening. I find it a

beautiful thought that my parents gave a “cup of cold water” even to our enemies. When all these men died on the way to England we were deeply touched. I was not the only one who cried myself to sleep. It is so cruel and so insane. But when your freedom has been trampled under foot, war is inevitable and we are in one way or another all part of it, to win the battle.