‘Memoirs’

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Lawson, 27th May, 1987

The material was written at the Drielsma family home
at
Lawson, N.S.W.
It was completed on the 27th May 1987

This, the first edition of this book, was produced in the
Spring of 1989
in Armidale, N.S.W., Aust.

Chapter 1

It was Sunday, 10th May 1940; mother's day. The most unforgettable mother's day or any other day in my existence. My mother woke me up at about six o'clock. "Wake up, wake up, The German's are invading."

We lived in the little village of Vaals in the province of Limburg. The backyard of the house was only a stones throw from the Dutch-German frontier. When my mother said the German's were invading, we were already some 25 km behind enemy lines. Swarms of planes were making their way to the west. There was a constant humming of traffic: tanks, we found out later.

I Got dressed and went outside, stunned. I remembered that the previous evening, I was having a drink at the bar of a local pub, talking to two off duty *marechausse'es* (state police) when they were suddenly recalled by a colleague. There was another alarm, as had happened a few times since the state of war in September 1939 between Germany and France.

Well, now it was reality. There was no escape. The Germans had invaded Belgium at the same time, Broke through the Dutch 'Peel' line and the Belgium 'Albert canal' line, both a continuation of the Maginot line, to be breached shortly. For Holland, the war was over in five days, for Belgium it was three weeks, then Dunkirk and the French surrender.

Night had settled over my country. It is 45 years ago. As I sit here and want to write down this story of five years of occupation, I realize that so many things have become vague, in respect of names belonging to faces and faces belonging to names. I remember the events, but many of the persons involved are faceless, nameless figures, as extras in a movie.

That first day of the invasion I remember that three German infantry men walked up the driveway and asked my mother far a cup of coffee. One

young soldier, maybe 20 years old, tried to apologize for having invaded Holland, saying that it was all the fault of the Jews.

"Did you like the coffee?", asked mother.

"Oh yes, lovely. This is the first real coffee I have tasted for years", the German answered.

"Well, remember that the first real coffee in enemy country was given to you by a Jewess."

The Germans paled and left in a huff.

I should mention here, that the population of Vaals was fluent in German, as the large German city of Aachen was only four kilometers across the border and was in effect the centre of culture and employment for many inhabitants of our village, before the border was closed.

In many films I saw after the war, dealing with German occupation of western European countries, one is made to believe, that overnight the full heavy fist of the occupiers came down on the subdued peoples. That was not so. Apart from the obvious rules that protected personnel and equipment of the army, there was not much change in the day to day living. The Germans still had velvet gloves over their iron fists. The Dutch army was not hauled off to German captivity. They were sent home and became civilians. Only in the middle of 1943 were the ex-army officers were called up and interned in a P.O.W. camp in Germany.

The tightening of the screws started after it was evident that the war was to last a long time. England resisted magnificently and the Dutch underground came into being slowly in September 1940.

Chapter 2

I went to an agricultural college in the town of Deventer. I was then 19 years old.

It was not till the early part of 1942 that the decree came for all Jews to wear a yellow star of David on the left side of the chest, with the word *'Jood'* (Jew) on it.

That day many of my compatriots in Deventer also donned a star and many of my colleagues at the college were arrested by the Germans, but after a few days released again.

Bit by bit the screws were tightened. First the star of David. Then the curfew. Jews had to remain inside their own homes between the hours of five o'clock p.m. till eight o'clock a.m. Then the decree that Jews were allowed to shop only for one hour in the afternoon. Consumer goods began to be scarce, especially fresh vegetables and fruit, which the Germans exported to their home country. The Jews were usually too late to get any of these goods. Our greengrocer kept some for us and had them delivered to us surreptitiously.

Then came the ban on traveling from one place to another. To go from one municipality to another one had to obtain a permit, which was only given if one could prove it was essential. Everything was organized to have the Jews easy at hand for round-ups and deportation. We knew it had to come. In Germany it had happened already. The deportation of thousands to the extermination camps had begun.

In July 1942, I had a last chance to get away from my village. I had to attend the awarding of diplomas at the college in Deventer and that was my excuse to obtain a traveling permit. I made up my mind to take the big step to go underground and say farewell to my parents, girlfriend, friends and my beloved village, where I was born 21 years ago.

I had some close friends at the college in Deventer and one of them, Fraus, with connections to the underground, told me an address in Rotterdam. That was the beginning of an odyssey that was to last till February 1945, when at last I happened to be in the right place at the right

time when a short advance by English troops happened to cover a farming community where I happened to be at the time.

What happened in the meantime I shall try to put down on paper.

Dates and duration of my sojourns in various places, names of people and addresses are only a vague memory, but I used to amuse myself to count the various beds I slept in during that time, some only for one night, others a few weeks, some for a few months. It came to twenty nine. It would have been very dangerous for other people concerned to have notes of names, addresses or phone numbers. Once you left a safe house, it was better to forget it even existed. The Germans had a rule, helpers of Jews were treated as Jews. They were hauled of to concentration camps and their properties confiscated. That did not deter the valiant Dutch underground and thousands of helpers. Of the Jewish population of 110,000 at the start of the occupation, they managed to hide approximately 10,000 and prevented the Germans from deporting them and killing them in the gaschambers of the extermination camps or worse.

In Rotterdam, I stayed with a Jewish family, friends of Frans Westerveld. There was a father, mother and two sons. I think they had a clothing store before the Germans or their Dutch Nazi puppets confiscated it. I remember that they clandestinely made Walt Disney figurines cut out in plywood by hand held fretsaws, painted and distributed by non-Jewish friends to shops. It kept them busy during the long hours of forced idleness. Later I was to use this idea which kept me from going insane in one of the hide outs.

From Rotterdam I was brought to a small village, Waddinxveen near Gouda. I stayed with a farmhand and his two daughters. It was a financial arrangement. They were very poor and the meals consisted mainly of potatoes and milk. I went to work as a farmhand to a nursery close by. I did not get any pay, but was treated very kindly by the proprietor and his family.

One day a company of Germans were wanting billets in the village. They were holding exercises in street fighting, probably with a view of a possible invasion of the allies and the rising of the Dutch underground.

One of the girls befriended some of the Germans and they visited the house where I lived. I was not feeling very happy about that. They were

not suspicious of my true status but then, they did not expect a Jew to be still alive in Holland. Nevertheless, it was only a matter of time before detection. My I.D. card had the J-stamp *(for Jew)* carefully cut out and replaced by plain paper that would have been sufficient for a cursory glance but not close inspection.

I sent word to my contact and I was removed from that address. At my suggestion, I went to the Hague, to my sister, Theres's place. Her husband had been deported already and my sister on the day of his arrest had a miscarriage. She had one son six years old, Jacques. She had a notion that she would be reunited with her husband and was all ready to go; had her rucksack packed.

Thus was the situation even then. In their innocence many Dutch Jews could not comprehend the real devilish mind of the Germans. I know of many who did not go in hiding for similar reasons as Theres's. Anyway I talked and talked to her and at last I got her promise that she would try and 'dive under'.*

I did not actually stay with my sister but with her next door neighbour, who was a policeman. After a few days he organized another temporary address, an upstairs apartment with a young couple. There I learned a few survival tricks. They both worked so I could not flush the toilet or switch on a light when they were out. Radios were confiscated by the Germans by then, to prevent the Dutch listening to the B.B.C. They also had to be careful when purchasing milk or bread in any larger quantity than usual. Traitors were all around. An innocent remark soon would have disastrous consequences for the 'divers' and their hosts.

The situation was rather tense. I had to leave when the couple went on their previously planned holiday for two weeks. I went to Deventer, where I stayed at various addresses. The one that I remember vividly was a household of a father, mother and a son of about fourteen years old. Two or three weeks previous, the father's brother had been shot by the Germans. He was held hostage for a sabotage act on a railway line. He and four others

*To dive under was a Dutch expression for going underground, going into hiding.

were the first hostages murdered in cold blood without any trial, their only crime being that they were Dutch and happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. There were many of those murders to follow in the following years.

As I lay on a bed in the attic the second night the idea came to me to go south as close to Vaals as a I dare. We had a tenant, I figured if I could get hold of a push-bike, I could travel to Sittard by train and then use the bike to the farm at Wolfhaag, a distance of about forty kilometres. I lay awake all night and worked out the whole plan in detail. I told my host the next morning what I wanted to do and he was generous enough to lend me a bike.

There was a chance that I would be recognized in Deventer or would be discovered by Germans checking identification cards. That could happen on either Deventer or Sittard station or on the train in transit. Then the last stretch close to my goal had to be in the dark and I knew that two of the local police in Vaals were quislings.

However, all went well and I arrived at the back paddock of the farm, where I left the bike and walked to the farm house. But the first thing I did when arriving, was getting down on my knees and kissing the ground. I had come home—but still so far from peace.

Chapter 3

When I knocked at the door, Pasman opened and thought he saw a ghost. His wife was stunned too. They thought I had escaped to Switzerland. That was the story, a friend in Vaals, Harry Heuschen had distributed to throw any inquirers of my track.

They both were scared stiff but agreed to harbour me anyway. I can't remember how long I stayed there, but it must have been between five and seven weeks.

In day-time I had to hide in the hay-loft above the stables where the pigs and cows were kept. When hay is put into the loft, it settles and forms a cavity under the heavy beams that hold up the roof.

This was a very cosy place as far as places go under the circumstances. After dark I would go inside the house and sleep in a bed, early in the morning, after breakfast, I had to go to the loft again. The stables were across a yard from the house proper.

Pasman informed my brothers Fred and Jacques that I had arrived. They were still around. They both visited me on separate days. That was the last time I saw Jacques.

Jacques had a girlfriend, a Jewish German refugee. She and her brother had already been picked up by the Germans and sent to the Dutch concentration camps at Westerbork. Jacques was determined not to go into hiding. He imagined that he would be reunited with Lilo. Eventually he was called up and actually went to Westerbork, where he found Lilo having acquired a new boy friend. I did my best to convince Jacques that there was no future in being deported, but he would not listen, unlike my sister Therese. He was deported to one of the horror camps. We never found out where. He did not come back. The girl and her brother survived and are still alive some where, probably in Israel, for Paul, the brother, was a Zionist.

The situation at Pasmans became untenable when Mrs Pasman became more frightened as time went by. After some time (five or six weeks) it was evident I had to move on. Harry Heuschen, who was the go-between between me and the outside world visited me a few times and got in touch with the

family of my girlfriend, Germaine van Baale. Her father was a Belgian and her mother French. They took me in and I spent Christmas in their place. I must have spent roughly four months there. The danger there was that it was on the outskirts of Vaals, where I was well known.

Opposite the road of the van Baale's place had been a bombstrike some time ago. It was during a raid on Aachen, when a pathfinder plane made a mistake and dropped a flare closer to Vaals than to Aachen, and a number of bombers unloaded their cargo over Vaals.

If this would happen again, there was a chance that I would be forced out of the house and my life and the van Baale's would not be worth two pence. I would be recognized straight away and the van Baale's would end up in a concentration camp. We were lucky nothing happened during my period there. But eventually I made a move to Maastricht, where my brother Joep, wife Tila and five children still lived 'free'.

When I arrived there, there was a party. About a dozen or so close friends were celebrating Tila's birthday, so it must have been the 10th of March, come to think of it. There was a Mrs Bollen, who put me up for the night. Mr Bollen had five children between seventeen and five years old. There was a little room on the third floor, about two by three meters where I was to stay till approximately November 1943. I settled in there. Things were less hectic. I felt safe. Maastricht is the capital of the Province of Limburg. The house was next to my brother's house, which he had to vacate, and from the rear window I could see on the playground of the highschool I had attended for five years and where I got my leaving certificate in 1938.

At this place I had contact with the underground forces. They provided me with the ration cards and an identity card with a new name. The ration cards were sometimes acquired by the underground through break-ins in offices of the rationing board but more often they were printed on the presses of the monks of Sleyl, the Sacred Heart Fathers. They had printing works for the publishing of pamphlets but during the war they did this illegal work. The ration cards were inspected by real inspectors of the rationing board and if O.K'ed, issued to those people in need, who could not get them through legal channels.

The I.D. cards were obtained through raids on Registry offices. My card was from a place called Vierlingsbeek (from memory). My name was changed to Paul Heynen and that was my name for the rest of the war. The I.D. had my own fingerprints and signature on it and apart from being stolen, it was sufficient to get by the run of the mill check ups on roads or railway stations. It could not stand close scrutiny, however, in case the S.S. would get involved. They could check up in the office of issue and the counterpart of my I.D. card would not be there.

The time I spent in Maastricht was rather uneventful, except that the war news was getting a bit more cheerful. The allies had landed in Sicily and the Russians were battering the Germans in the East.

When the allies landed in Sicily, I made a map of that island with all the names of townships on it. A friend of the family, who visited me, thought he could sell them for me. So I started producing about twenty of them and he sold them for me at one guilder each. I also started making little Dutch national dressed boys and girls. The friend of the family, who's name was Pfister, was actually a friend of my brother Albert. They knew each other from the Red Cross Society where they both were voluntary ambulance men and blood donors.

Early in the war, they were drafted to work in the Maastricht Hospital. The patients were mostly civilians, wounded somehow in the German advance. Most came from Belgium. Many Belgians had fled to Holland when the fighting around the forts of Liege was raging. However, there were a few Germans wounded.

One day, after Albert had given blood for a transfusion to a German infantryman, he was in the ward and the German thanked him for donating the blood. Albert asked him how he felt. He said he felt fine. Then Albert told him that he now had Jewish blood in his veins. The German turned a deep red and turned his head away.

While I was in Maastricht, Albert and his wife Sybilla (Bila) were looking after old invalid Jewish men and women, who were (temporarily) exempted from deportation. Eventually of course, they were taken and my brother and wife with them. Some of those poor wretches were 80 and 90 years old in wheelchairs. Nobody survived.

Also in that time Joep and wife and five children went underground. Joep, Mathilda (Tila) and their son John (13), Daughter Flora (12) and Adele [illegible] went to a house opposite the place where I was; the younger two boys

Albert and Louis were taken to the country, where they were well looked after by a family. Their ages were, I think, five and three respectively.

The house where Joep was, was actually a pharmacy where the assistant pharmacist (Neuman) lived with his wife and four children. The owner did not know anything about this. They had one room on the first floor at the rear, which was usually used as a store room.

They had to keep quiet all day long, could not go to the toilet and only were allowed out of their room after the Neuman's children had gone off to bed. Even the Neuman's own children did not know anything about this. Food was brought in through the neighbour's house. All houses in the block had walls broken out in the cellars, in case a bomb destroyed a dwelling, there was a chance of rescue through the cellars, where the inhabitants were supposed to be anyway during an attack.

The neighbours, who also were in the plot would buy the food and bring it through the cellars after dark. Extra unusual garbage went out the other way. One had to be very careful not to do anything that could arouse suspicion. Traitors were everywhere. The chemist himself was absolutely trustworthy, but the other staff, whilst anti-German, could easily drop an odd remark in the wrong place or company.

This situation was maintained till the liberation of Maastricht in September 1944, about 17 months.

I used to visit them some nights; it was only across the street. How they could keep those three children quiet during the day I never know. It must have been a nerve wrecking time for the parents, and their lives depended on it.

Flore contracted T.B. while she was there. A doctor had to come one night on the sly and had to be taken into the plot. He also came in through the neighbours cellar. However, apart from special food, there was not much that could be done till after the liberation. Flore recovered, married eventually and had three healthy children.

Coming back to the plywood figurines. I cut them out with a fretsaw, painted them and mounted them on a wooden slat. After a while. I switched from dolls to the traditional 'Dutch Lion', but instead of a bundle of arrows, my lion clutched the Red, White and Blue flag. They proved to be very

popular and I sold a few hundred of them through Pierre Pfister. After a while I had a request for the same figure, but with the Belgian flag.

I got the materials from my hostesses' brother, who owned a wood-working factory. He was forced by the German's to make wooden toys for the German market. He asked me once to make plywood cut-outs for little horses on four wheels, the kind that the unsophisticated three year old of those days would drag behind on a string. When he explained they were for export to Germany, I declined.

While I was in this safe house, I was sometimes visited by Jan Lamour, a school mate of mine. He had a rather substantial influence on my decision later on to convert to the Catholic faith.

I mentioned my new identity card earlier. The underground worker who organized the particulars was a Mr 'Lenders', an elderly gentleman whose true name I never knew. He was apprehended some time later and has never been seen again.

Another worker was the gentleman who used to bring the monthly rationcards. To my amusement it appeared to be my former science teacher from highschool. The underground was a cross section of the whole populace. Communists worked side by side with the parish priest, the coal-miner with the company director, housewives with the shop assistant. Only one overriding emotion tied them together, the hate of the invader, who took their liberty and made a mockery of human rights. Apart from the quislings, who were only a very small doomed gang of social misfits and opportunists, the Dutch nation never was so united and probably never will be again.

Chapter 4

The war was dragging on. The allies had knocked Rommel and the Italians out of Africa, they had landed in Sicily and now were poised to land in mainland Italy. But this was only September 1943 and the end was not yet in sight. The local leaders of the underground thought it prudent to relocate me to an outlying area on a farm. This was brought about through the intermediary of a curate of the Vaals parish. He lived opposite our house in Vaals and I knew him well. His name was Wim Wermelink, he was young, only a few years older than I and very much involved in underground activity. He had direct contact with the organisation in northern Limburg, called L.O. for *Ladelyke Organisatie* (Rural Organisation).

This L.O., headquarters Sevenum, north Limburg, was a very important link in the pipeline, through which allied pilots, shot down in Germany and Holland, rescued by the population or escaped from German hands, were brought through Belgium, France and Spain to Portugal, the famous escape route, about which enough books have been written.

The L.O. North Limburg and L.O. South Limburg also sent food like grain, meat and potatoes, gathered from the rich farmlands of the north, and clothing and coal from the mining district in the south to the underground in the North of Holland. Most of the transport was by river-boats, a slow process, but fairly safe. These goods were distributed in the north of Holland to families where people were hiding, or relatives of underground workers who had perished in the battle and had no income or ration cards.

The L.O., like any other organisation, sometimes attracted wrong elements, either traitors or young men who got carried away and displayed a kind of Cowboy and Indian mentality, thereby endangering the whole organisation. They meant well but they had to be stopped.

While I was in Sevenum I stayed for a while with the chief of the North Limburg organisation, Harry Hansen. He was a public accountant. Next door his brother ran a bakery and the two employees were couriers for the

L.O. who regularly went to the south, to Heerlen, Maastricht, Sittard and Vaals.

It was there that I heard the story of a young fellow who was becoming an embarrassment. He did some wild things on his own. So one day three members of the Gestapo or S.D. *(Sicherheist-Dionst)* raided his place, but not before he was tipped of by the L.O. He had bolted just in time and from then on went underground for the duration. Only he never knew that the three S.D. men were Dutch resistance fighters in German uniforms. This was called 'artificial Diving'. I met the person in question a few years ago, he is now living in Sydney.

I spent Christmas with Harry's family and shortly after was placed on a mixed farm where I stayed for a few months.

From there I went to a small poultry farm run by Piet Arts, a leader of the underground who looked after approximately 300 divers, 80 to 90 of which were Jews; they were dispersed over many farms over a wide area. Piet looked after their ration cards and their bodily and mental well being. Piet devoted his whole life to the care of his charges, was always on the road on his push-bike, rain or shine, through snow and mud.

There was a secret P.O. Box in Venlo, where relatives could send mail. This mail was collected by a postal clerk cum freedom-fighter and then through a courier delivered to Piet, who distributed the letters. Piet was decorated by the Queen and also by the Israeli Government who invited him to visit Israel for a fortnight. Piet died in 1985 at the age of ninety six.

At the poultry farm where I lived in the food shed cum storeroom, there was a daily gathering of me and three other divers. Their reason for diving was that they were students. In 1943 the Germans closed all universities in Holland and the students were sent to Germany to work as slave labourers. Medical students were sent to work in German hospitals. A number were selected on their 'Aryan characteristics' and were housed in nurses quarters, where they were supposed to act as studs in the absence of so many German males. A great many escaped that draft but had to 'dive under' either with family or on farms.

The two brothers, Conny and Fraus van Meegeran from Venlo and Paul Classet from Maastricht were with farms in the street where I was on the chicken farm.

They worked on the various farms and after work they came and we played cards or listened to the clandestine radio. We had there a crystal receiver and could get the B.B.C. and kept up to date with the war news.

Chapter 5

The 6th of June 1944 came. Invasion! What a day it was. We could not get enough of the words spoken through the B.B.C. news. The invasion of fortress Europe had begun. More than four years after night settled the veil of darkness began to lift. But at what cost! We had another highlight when Paris was liberated. Fraus van Meegeren had got hold of a bottle of wine and we drank, under the motto: "*Paris vaut bien une goûte!!* "Paris is worth a drink, after some French king, who a few hundred years ago had said, "*Paris vaut bien une Messe.*"

Behind the poultry sheds was a little thicket, a plank over a little creek led to it. Inside the thicket was a clearing and there we could celebrate without anybody seeing us.

The next excitement was 15th Sept, 1944. The allies were breaking through to the South of Holland. Maastricht was liberated. Noord *(north)* Brabant and Zeeland were entered and the airbridge to Arnhem was started. Alas, the fate of Arnhem is history. But still, the Germans were in full retreat. The mighty German army! We saw them along the road to Venlo, pushing baby carriages, push-bikes, even boys scooters. They were a thoroughly disorganized lot. But they made another stand.

The combat zone came closer to us. We got word to disappear from view. There was a lot of activity in the village now by German units. We (Fraus, Con, Paul and I) found refuge in a previously constructed hide-out on the farm where Conny was 'home'. It was a heap of peat, constructed to have a hollow centre. All farms in the region used peat from a nearby ven as fuel. The digging of peat was a winter activity, then the blocks of peat were dug to dry for the next winter.

There were different ingenious shelters. There was another kind, constructed with another kind of peat. Most farmers had a plot of pinetrees in the western part of the 'Peel', a swamp that was reclaimed during the depression, where unemployed workers were deployed to regain this land. Every farmer could buy a plot of 18ha under certain conditions. They had to

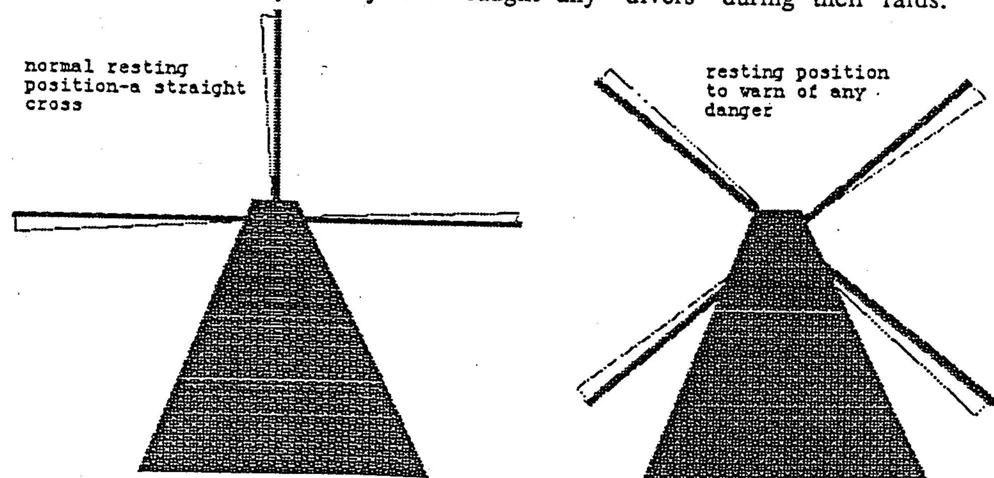
trim the pine plantations of undergrowth and lower branches. Those branches were bundled and tied with tie wire and after drying were used in the clay baking ovens to burn and provide the heat and hot ashes to bake the bread once every three weeks.

Anyway, these bundles were built into roughly four meter high pyramids, much in the manner as hay or straw is stored in the open. Only these pyramids were built over a dug out, where a man could stand upright, where bunks were built and the entrance was camouflaged with all kinds of ingenious material or side tracks.

Another shelter was the false wall in a room, to provide a narrow strip along one side of the room. The entry was usually through a built in cupboard with a loose plank.

Every now and again the word was out that the Germans were approaching the village for a raid. That was before this latest development. We used to get a warning from Venlo, we were close to the top of the L.O. Others, further away were immediately warned by phone or messenger, but those who were working in the field had another novel way of warning. In another village south of Sevenum in a place called Heldon, there was a mill. This mill normally was at rest with the vanes in a straight cross. Whenever there was any danger, the vanes were put in the Andreas-Cross formation.

It could be seen for miles and miles in the flat country. From Venlo the miller would receive a cover telephone message, when the "*Grüme Polizei*" (military police) left in his direction. The Germans never woke up to this trick and they hardly ever caught any 'divers' during their raids.



The situation worsened in October 1944, following the Arnhem debacle. The Germans started to entrench themselves in the north of Limburg, the gateway to the Rhineland and the Ruhr military complex, with the Krupp and Thiessen arms factories in Essen etc.

It was a Sunday morning and most men, farmers and others, were in the Sevenum church attending mass. The Germans surrounded the church and thus captured hundreds of men, who were dragged away to Germany to dig tank traps and fortifications. They did not return till the capitulation or liberation. Some never returned.

We, the four of us were in a peat stack shelter across the road from the poultry sheds. The second day two American pilots were added. They were two aircrew rescued from a flying fortress. shot down by the Germans not far from Sevenum. I only remember one of them. He was named Roy and both came from Chicago. They stayed with us for two nights. Then the message came that the farm was to have German Pauser troops billeted. That night we four evacuated back to one of the fowl sheds, the two Americans went to a fowl-shed further away behind the farm, to the north of the road. Our shed was to the south.

The fowl sheds in this area are closed wooden constructions with the wall to the south glassed to receive maximum sunlight in the winter. The perches were along the length of the back of the shed, about 1 meter high and three rows of 'two by threes'. This shed was not being used for hens any more, but a store room for hay. The hay was stacked along the rest of the area. There was a cavity under the perches where we could hide. To get in the cavity we tunneled under the rest of the hay, ensuring the opening was camouflaged.

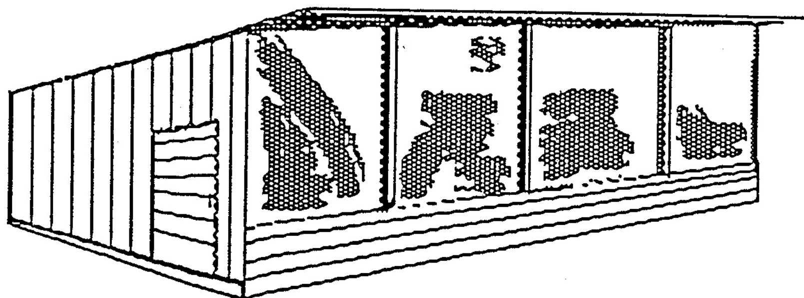
Piet Arts used to bring us food, usually sandwiches, and milk or coffee which he would bring in the shed and leave on the floor for us to pick up. From our hide out we had to bring food to the two Americans during the night. The first night Frans and I went with food, we had to crawl between two farm buildings where Germans were billeted. We didn't know anything about any guards, and had to take it easy. We made it.

The yanks felt miserable. They had no blankets and had to make do with a stack of jute bags. They were talking about making a run for it. They

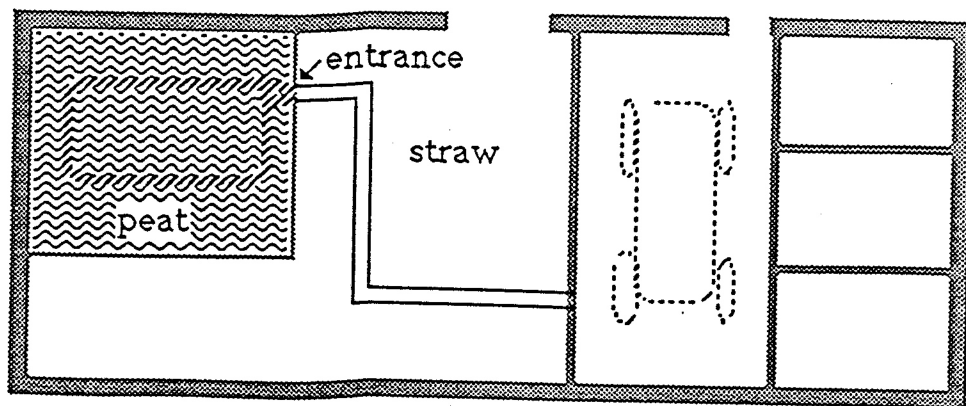
were in civilian cloths and we had heard of stories that Germans shot allied personnel if they were in civilian cloths.

When we went back to the place, we heard a car coming on the road. We ducked into the grass and when the car, an open staff car, came past, we heard the grunting of a pig. The Germans had evidently 'liberated' the pig and were taking it back to Germany. We thought the whole episode funny and an anti-climax to the tension we were under.

When we went the next night to feed the yanks, they had gone. We heard later, that they had been picked up near a village further to the west. We never found out what had happened to them.



The Fowl Shed



The peat hide-out

Chapter 6

I don't know how long we had been in our hide out, probably seven or eight days. We played bridge and read magazines. One day one of us went to pick up the food and a can of milk when we saw two or three Germans coming towards the shed. They were just strolling there; they were not armed.

They must have looked through the front window and there was the can standing. They never said anything and left. We knew something was awfully wrong. To make matters worse, we were betting on them not having seen the can and we took it away. Sure enough, in no time they were back with their rifles. I heard one of them say that the can had disappeared.

They came inside and one of them shouted *"Komm' raus oder wir schiessen"* (come out or we'll shoot). They knew we must be hiding under the hay but they didn't know how to get at us. So the easiest was to unload their rifles at random into the hay. We didn't deliberate very long and Fraus shouted. "We'll come out."

They took us and our two clandestine radios and brought us to the farm where Connie was 'home'. It was now a command fort for the unit that captured us. They were rather sporting, just army people and probably more fed up with the war than we were. They gave us a cigarette each and allowed the farmer's wife to give us some food.

The sergeant or whatever he was made a phone call and a few minutes later we were marched down the street to another command post. This time there was a lieutenant in charge. Our names etc. were taken down and we had to wait in an anteroom. As I walked out of the interrogation room, a German private came up to me and said in German: "If I were you I would get rid of the beard". We all had a three and a half weeks growth on our face. We were not able to wash or shave, while we were in the hiding places. I immediately sensed what he was getting at, but played dumb. "What for?", I asked.

He said, *"Measch, du siehst ja aus wie ein Rabbiner!* ", (Man, you look like a Rabbi) and continued: "I don't care that you are a Jew, I had a Jewish

friend a long time ago; but watch it if you get to the S.S. interrogators, they'll soon find out and you'll hang.

I kept up a brave front and scoffed at his suggestion and produced the rosary I wore around my neck under my shirt. "I am a Catholic", I said, "Look, I have a Rosary". He laughed and said that anyone could wear a rosary. Funny thing, after the first interrogation one of the soldiers gave Conny a rosary saying, "Here, you have it, I have no use for it any more."

We were put on the back of an army truck and under the watchful eyes of two guards with automatic rifles were transported from Sevenum to what we later learned was Blerick. Blerick is situated on the west bank of the Meuse River (Maas) opposite Venlo on the east bank.

We were delivered at another farm house, where the young family was still in residence. The first opportunity I had, I asked the farmer for a razor-blade and somehow got rid of my 5mm beard without soap. It hurt, but I looked a bit more 'Aryan.'

This place appeared to be a divisional H.Q. and we were interrogated by a Major. Fraus van Meegeren was first. After what seemed to be ten minutes he was brought back by the guard. He looked wild, fuming, and said: "Don't let the bastards intimidate you, stand up for your ideas".

It was my turn next. I was brought into the room where the Major was sitting behind a large desk. There also was a Lieutenant who seemed to be making notes. The Major tried the soft come-on first. Said he: "You are also a student?" We all were students as they already knew.

"Yes."

"Then how in the name of decency can you as students look the way you do, like beggars and vagabonds!"

I said, "Clothes don't make the man." He disagreed and said, "Only clothes make the man." Different philosophies evidently!

This shows that the man had not the foggiest idea of what was going on in this part of his *'Festung Europa'* (Fortress of Europe). He told me that he was a university lecturer in civil life and that he often spent his pre-war holidays in Holland, which he referred to as *"Eín Schmuch kästchen"* (a little jewel box). "And look what the English have made of it now." (sic!!) After a while it dawned on him that I understood and spoke German. "How

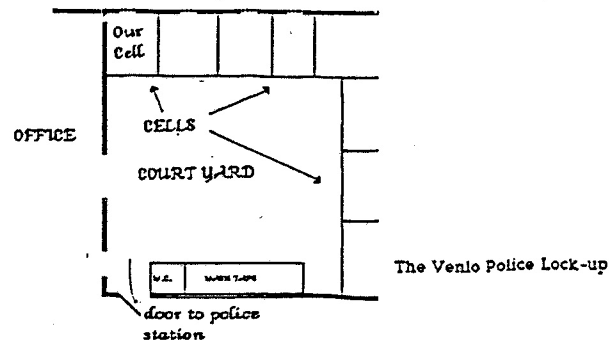
come you speak German so well?", he asked. "My mother was a German", I answered

"Sprichtt denn das deutsche blut nicht in ihmen?" (Does not speak the German blood in you?)

"Nein, dass blut meines Vaters war stärker." (No, my father's blood was stronger.)

By then it was clear to me that he was not one of the real Nasi criminals and I think he knew that we were having a legitimate fight against an occupier and intruder. He really didn't know how to wash his hands of us and he said: "What am I going to do with you?" I didn't consider this a rhetoric question and thus said: "Well, leave us here, where we are at the farm house till the British come and then we are free!" He exploded: "What do you mean, till the British come; another fortnight and we'll have them back in the North Sea!" This was November 1944!

Anyway, the interview was over and after Conny and Paul had had their turn with similar experiences, we were bundled off in another truck to the east, across the Maas, to Venlo where we were put in the police station lock-up. Paul and I were put in a cell with one concrete bunk with a bit of dirty straw on it. To lie on it we had to lie head to toe, 'sardines in a tin' fashion. We had brought a blanket. Paul was given one at Sevenum. In the cell next to us were two boys who were picked up by the Germans while attempting to cross the Maas a bit further to the south where the west bank was already in British hands. Connie and Fraus, the two brothers, were in the next cell. There were five cells in a row on a side of the courtyard and another three at right angles with our row. The other two sides of the rectangle court was a kind of ablution block and store room opposite us and offices on our right. (see figure)



The Venlo Police Lock-up

The two van Meegerens were born and bred in Venlo and they knew exactly where they were. The second day we were brought to a domestic science school across the street, now barracks for the '*Grüne Polizei*' (German M.P.s). We had to peel potatoes for their kitchen. It was there that the van Meegerens were sighted by someone they knew. In a short time a message was smuggled in, how I don't know. It said; "When you see someone waving a handkerchief, jump out of the window and run to such and such a place." I didn't know anything about this at the time.

Security was slack. As I said, the Gerry's by then had a belly full of the war and knew that they were beaten. The school windows were not barred and we worked at street level. After a while I was taken by a German guard to the boiler room where I had to clean the grate of the central heating boiler furnace. He got all sentimental and I had to admire a photo of his wife and two children, and how he hoped he would be home for Christmas. On the way out we went past a desk. As I was walking behind him, I pinched a cigarette out of a box standing on the desk. When I came back to the cell, Paul told me that Fraus and Con had bolted and were safe.

We spent the night shivering on the cold cot. The next morning we were let out to wash and we met our colleagues. There were, I think, about ten Dutch, mostly our age. There was one Russian prisoner who somehow had escaped from Germany, was picked up again somewhere around here, and there was a German civilian who was held for black marketeering, an elderly fellow, I guess about 55-60 years old.

After, we were given a few chunks of the military black rye bread. We tried to save as much as we could from our rations for worse times to come. Later we were brought to the school again, for more potatoes peeling. After the Germans gave us (six prisoners) a small washing tub full of pea soup. The two neighbours produced a spoon each. They said they always carry a spoon, since they had been in a forced labour camp in Germany. It sounded like the fellow who carries a bottle opener and proudly assures his mates, that he's never without it. Anyway, we ate as much of the stuff as we could and during the night we all were thoroughly sick.

The next day we were told by a guard that we were going to be interrogated by the Gestapo. The two boys in the next cell had been brought away already and we were to be next. The two were being accused of being

spies and we could expect the same. What now happened is such a incredible train of events that I only can say that it was a miracle.

I said to Paul, "We have to get out of here somehow, if not, we are dead, at least I am." Paul knew by then, that I was a Jew and that I had no more of a chance to survival than a snowflake in hell if I ever got to the Gestapo.

The thought came into my head and I said to Paul: "What if we ask the guard to let us out of the cell to go to the toilet and then we come back in the cell, push the bolt back by pulling my arm through the peephole and then hope that they forget to turn the key." We both prayed fervently for some minutes and then I called out to the guard, that I had to go to the toilet badly. He came, unlocked the door and shoved the bolt back and I went to the ablution block. I came back, the guard had gone inside the office building. I closed the cell door and pushed my arm through the aperture in the cell door and could just reach the bolt and shoved it home. Here comes miracle no. 1. The guard was just then changed. The new man walked past all the cells to check the bolts. It looked alright to him. It never occurred to him to check the actual lock. We waited till he went back into the office block. I put my arm again through the hole and pulled the bolt back, after a moments hesitation, I opened the cell door. So far so good.

The next step was to walk across the yard and climb up on the bars and wire in front of one of the cells with a window. The last of the three cells at right angles to our row was the cell where the German was kept. His cell door was not locked and stood open.

Paul hesitated, before we left the cell, he was scared of the German. If he would see us, he certainly would give us away. I said to Paul, "Well, I am sorry, but it then will be my life or his." Another miracle: the fellow was sound asleep on his bunk. We climbed up on the window.

I'll never forget the Russian, who was in that cell, looking at us, following us climbing past his face, his eyes bright and smiling he said in broken German, "*Alle Kameraden fort*" (All comrades gone).

The roof of the cell was about ten feet high and there was a barbed wire fence on top of it. Just as I was to clear the barbed wire, I saw Paul walking back to his cell. He turned his face back to me. I motioned furiously

for him to come after me. There was no time to spare for me and I had no choice.

Another miracle, the offices on our right where usually one or more Germans were busy doing something, was deserted for the whole time we tried our escape. It felt like a long time, but probably was only minutes, maybe only one minute.

I jumped of the roof and ran towards a heap of rubble from bombed houses, I looked back and to my great relief and joy saw Paul jump off the roof as well. He told me he was caught in the barbed wire for an eternity and his duffel overcoat was torn in many places. But he had made it. We ran towards the shell of a deserted three storey house and went up to the third floor, and sat there all day till near dark. We had brought the saved up bread and were not hungry. I kept myself busy repairing Paul's coat with a needle I had borrowed from the guard who wanted to go home at Christmas and threads pulled out of the torn material. I had borrowed the needle in the morning to repair a tear in my trousers. The German said to make sure he got the needle back. It was his last one. He said he had lent needles out before and had never got them back.

Nothing happened. The Germans evidently thought that we had been taken away for interrogation by the Gestapo, or they couldn't care less.

After the liberation we learned that the two chaps next door had been executed that same day at the nearby German airfield.

We also learned that after our escape nobody was allowed out any more for washing or toilet. We also knew then, that as soon as the number of prisoners rose to forty, they were transported to Germany. That meant towards the end of the waiting there could be as many as five people in a cell with one bunk for one person. We were very fortunate we came in the day that one transport of forty had left. Had we come in the day before, there would not have been time to escape. Then again, maybe the Gestapo interrogation would not have taken place, at least not in Venlo. Possibly later on in Germany.

At dusk, we ventured out of the house and went up the street. We walked aimlessly. There were a few people walking hurriedly by. Then we saw a priest. We accosted him and told him our plight. he carried a parcel in his arms across his chest. He said he was sorry he could not attend to us

personally. He just saved the Chalice with consecrated hosts from his bombed church and had to bring it to safety in another church. He gave us an address where we would be looked after. He said to look for glass hothouses and gave us the street and number. Eventually we found the place. Venlo is a centre of horticulture, there are acres and acres of glass houses where vegetables are grown.

By the time we got there it was dark. I can't remember any location or face of that episode. I only know that the place was crawling with fugitives. There were French, Russians, English and American pilots. Dutch resistance and divers. We spent the night there. I don't remember how! The next day a girl came to bring us to a convent outside Venlo; Maria Weide. It was a girl's boarding school, but all the students had gone home. The nun's were still there. It was a very large building and was mainly occupied by refugees from Blerick, whom the Germans had thrown out of their dwellings through bombings. Paul and I were put up in a small room that must have been a students bedroom.

It is there that we met another two brothers, Jan and Theo Knops, who occupied the room next to us. They both were carpenters; their father was a building contractor. They were in the convent to prevent deportation to Germany.

Up till now the Germans had not interfered with the running of the convent as a refugee centre. The Knopses did all kinds of maintenance jobs, and we were detailed with them. We shifted beds and furniture around and a few days we all four spent on the roof, painting an enormous red cross in a white square to identify the place for allied bombers as a non-military building.

There must have been around two hundred and fifty people in this convent. Mainly women, children and older men. The young men were either in hiding somewhere else or already deported to Germany as slave labourers.

We must have stayed there into December. We were kept busy all day with all kinds of jobs, but had also time to meet young men, one of whom was lying with a broken leg in a cellar. The other was his friend, Jan van Deutekom. They were both from Venlo. We befriended them and even later saw one of them regularly. It was there also that I met Father Eric, a

Dominican priest, who, with a few confreses, had sought refuge in this convent, having been evacuated from their own cloister.

One night there was a heave raid on the Ruhr Industrial area, which lies just east of Venlo. There was heavy flak and the German night fighters from Venlo airfield were attacking the heavy Lancaster bombers. By then the English R.A.F. mainly bombed in night-time with Lancaster four engined bombers, whereas the Americans did their attacks during the day with Flying Fortresses and Liberators.

Sometimes there were more than a thousand planes involved (as we learned the next day via the BBC) and if they were not very far into Germany the first planes would be on their way back as the last were still going in.

Many were shot down, mainly by German nightfighters. Out of 900 or 1000 attackers the losses could have been as high as 60 or 70 planes, which meant that between five to six hundred aircrew were either killed or taken prisoner, if they were lucky enough to bail out.

Paul, Theo, Jan Knops, Jan van Deutekom and I were sent to the attic to watch for incendiary bombs. If one came through the roof we were to pick it up with a shovel and put it in a bucket with sand. At least that was the theory. If it were an explosive bomb, we did not have to do anything, we would simply be buried with the rubble two storeys down.

Bombs started to come down. A Lancaster was hit and was dropping his bombs at random to lighten the aircraft or to get rid of them before attempting a crashlanding.

Was I scared? My word. Anybody who would not be scared under the circumstances would have to be a complete idiot. We stuck it out. We were not hit. The next day we heard about a couple of Canadians who had been rescued by farmers and hidden.

There was a little black pup, which was the tailgunner's mascot. The gunner was dead, but the dog was rescued and eventually found it's way into the convent and given to the chap with the broken leg, who promptly christened it: Lancaster.

The other thing I found out the next day was a pair of very dirty underpants and it was not just because I had not changed for about five weeks. Jan's mother, who visited her son regularly, and did his laundry

offered some underwear from the Krups boys. The next day she brought it back and told us she had to wash the underpants about four times.

Meanwhile the Germans were driven back over the Maas and Blerick was liberated. Pity the major did not let us stay there when I asked him.

Things gradually got worse. More German military personnel withdrawn from the west bank of the Maas now was on the east bank. The houses on the east bank were now under sniper fire from the English and had to be evacuated. This brought more pressure again on the limited accommodation in places like our convent. The brothers Jan and Theo wanted to join their family; father, mother and three sisters. Jan and Theo planned to attempt the crossing of the Maas and asked us to join.

Chapter 7

At this point I have to deal with the matter of my conversion. The place where I was born and grew up was at the time a small village of perhaps 1000 inhabitants and practically 100% catholic.

We grew up with catholic friends, took part in all the religion related festivities such as the feast of the village's Patron saint (St Hubert), Christmas, and Easter. We celebrated Canucka and Christmas, Pesach and Easter. Later on, when I was a teenager, a lot of German Jews fled to Holland and some settled in Vaals. We then got a Synagogue and we were more Jewish orientated, but my friends were still the same catholics. Catholicism was always very close. We talked a lot and debated the various issues.

Across from our butcher shop, on the other side of the street, was the presbytery and I often talked to the two curates who lived there.

My father, who was a devout man but liberal in his views, once told me shortly before I left home in 1942, that he thought it would have been better if we had become Catholics and assimilated, rather than face the ordeal that was coming.

Of course that was a simple view. The Germans didn't care about a person's religion, they only went by race. Anyway my father said he was too old for a change, but didn't mind at all, however, if I would convert. I never had talked to him about it. I never even had the inclination of converting. But I kept thinking about it. Later on, after I had fled and was in hiding, I was amazed at the strength of belief my catholic helpers had. They risked their lives and made the impossible possible through the sheer love of god and the strength of their conviction. They helped Jews because they believed it was their duty. I found this attitude throughout my odyssey and gradually I was convinced that a religion that had so much love to offer, must have something. After the war I found that other Christian religions in Holland had done as much for the Jews and other persecuted persons.

The first one to set me thinking was, as I mentioned before, Jan Lamour, my class mate from Highschool, who visited me in Maastricht and prayed for and with me.

Later, when I went to Sevenum, I had long discussions with the Parish Priest Fr. Gommans, a wonderful person who debated with me all my problems. He did not so much instruct me—I knew Catholicism—but I played the role of the Devil's advocate, telling him my doubts and the unacceptability of some tenets of the Catholic church. At last he convinced me. Of course I was receptive from the start, otherwise I would not have gone near him. But he convinced me in a gentle but plausible way. I also must have had an enormous lot of grace to be able to accept the dogmas in the end.

However, Father Gommans would not baptize me. He felt that I was not ready for it. He thought the right thing was to wait till after the war. He thought I was vulnerable to being influenced under the circumstances.

After being captured and my miraculous escape, I was even more convinced of the hand of god leading me.

In the convent in Venlo, on hearing that we were planning to cross the Maas, Father Eric, the Dominican thought it better that I should be baptized before undertaking such a dangerous mission. As only Father Eric and Paul knew of my Jewishness, I was baptized in our room. Paul was my godfather.

To me, being Catholic meant adhering to the Catholic religion. I am still a Jew racially, of course. I am proud of what happened with the formation of the Jewish nation, Israel. After the war I was a Catholic Jew or a Jewish Catholic, whatever!

I found sometimes, that I was accepted as a Christian only till I mentioned my Jewishness. Yes, there also will be anti-Semites anywhere in the world. But I always was proud of my Jewish heritage. I still am. All the people I befriended later in New Guinea and Indonesia knew of my conversion, because I told them. I was proud to be a Catholic and a Jew.

After the war I got engaged to a girl I had known all my life. She was the apothecary's daughter, who lived with her father and mother across the street next to the presbytery.

One evening we went to see a performance of the local theatre group. It was one of those plays that seem to be specially written for a low budget, amateur groups.

There was a character in it, a Jew who was depicted in the historical role of the arch villain, in the fashion of Shylock. I was disgusted and could not believe that a few months after the liberation, after the truth of the holocaust became known in it's full horror, it was possible to witness such an obvious anti-Semitic gesture.

I clamped up and all but ran out of the hall, which I did anyway at the intermission. My fiance came with me. At her home after, she took me to task for my reaction. She said; "How can you take such offence, you are a Catholic now, not a Jew anymore", to which I answered: "Of course I am still a Jew, as much as a Javanese or Chinese Catholic is still a Javanese or Chinese."

The nest day I broke our engagement. However, when in 1950 Mia and I went to Australia, I felt that in order to save our future children from the harassment of bigoted racists, we were going to start afresh and keep my Jewish background secret.

I didn't know that Australia was different. My fears were probably unfounded, but I did what I did, and I thought I did the best for our children, who were Catholic born and bred and I thought I was protecting them from the agony, debasing, ridicule and sometimes violence I had suffered throughout my youth in however small measure at some time or other.

I make no apologies for this. When I told my children at an age when they could understand, their reaction made me very happy, because they also were proud of my heritage.

Having explained my actions in this respect, I only want to add, that my conversion was not a convenience thing, a way of getting out of trouble. In the first place the German's killed all Jews whether they were Christian, Mohammedan or Jewish or atheists or agnostics. They dragged off Nuns and Priests to concentration camps, because they were Jews racially.

In the second place, I had the experience of my brother Fred, who married a Catholic girl. Their two boys were baptized at birth, were raised as Catholics and went to Catholic schools. But they were still sometimes persecuted and abused by some of their schoolmates. Yes, at a Catholic school! In those days it was fashionable to persecute Jews by people who had been brought up as bigots through the ages. One can witness the same phenomenon today in Northern Island and Lebanon.

I believe the Jewish nation were the chosen people, not to be better or advantaged but chosen to produce the Messiah. And when he eventually came, he was not recognized or acknowledged by many Jews, but there were also many Jews who accepted him, and I did so nearly 2000 years later.

I never cared much about the frills and trimmings of the Jewish faith and neither do I now about the Catholic faith. But I believe in the important things, I also am tolerant towards other Christian religions and regret that there are so many different ones, where there should be only one universal Christendom. I think I had better go back to my story now.

Chapter 8

Our stay in the convent, as far as the younger men were concerned, had to come to an end. It was only a matter of time, before the Germans would raid the building in search of "divers", in order to send them to Germany as slave labourers.

The Knops brothers wanted to go home for Christmas anyway and asked Paul and I to join them. They had asked their parents if it was alright with them. They said it was and we were welcomed as if we were their children. What a magnamonious gesture. One can't imagine what this meant. Having two extra mouths to feed who didn't have any ration cards any more, besides, there wasn't much to be had even with coupons. I still don't know how they managed. Of course we were hungry all the time, but no more hungry than our hosts and their own sons.

One day we went on a scavenging trip into the country. By then we could not much care any more about being picked up by the Germans. Fortunately the regular army personnel could not care less about us walking around. And the field Gendarmes (Military Police) only seemed to be looking after army business. By the way, this army business included throwing people out of their houses, if they needed the accommodation for themselves. Without notice they would come and chase the inhabitants out, small children, babies, old men and women; just threw them out in the snow, with whatever they could carry of clothes.

The Knops family had a bit of salt and a few candles to barter with farmers for food.

We then saw the farmers were helping the Venlo population within the limited reach of their means. When I say this, I mean that the limits were stretched to the most incredible boundaries. We saw farm buildings, where maybe as many as 100 people were living in barns and stables, all being fed by the farmers. They would have bread and potatoes and milk for the children.

At the time we didn't realize what fantastic effort this was. We were taken in the same way by the Knops family.

If one looks around now in 1986 one can easily wax nostalgic about that period, these dark days, when the goodness and love of people was a natural thing and taken for granted.

Another time, we went to the Venlo airfield. This was a large area with landing strips for German night fighter planes. This was one of the main defence areas of the Germans to combat the Allied attacks on the Ruhr industrial area of Essen, Dortmund and Düseldorf. The Germans had planted potatoes between the runways for camouflage. When the potatoes had matured in October, the fields were under constant English artillery fire from the west bank of the Maas. The German fighters had left and the whole place was deserted when we went there. We had a handcart and armed with forks and bags we went to work.

The potatoes had been sown for camouflage only and the crop was miserable. There were five of us. Jan van Deutekom had joined us. We worked all day long, the five of us and managed to gather five bags of potatoes, a bag per man. But it was a real luxury, to have them. Flower would soon run out and potatoes would be the only food left. The airfield was full of bomb craters and every now and again, when the English fired another round of grenades, we had to jump in one of them, assuming a grenade never strikes the same spot twice. (sic!)

At one time we noticed a few Germans, watching us digging away, later we passed them on the way home. They looked at us, but never said anything. We probably looked like labourers on a job and raised no suspicion while working and walking openly in a matter of fact way.

In the meantime Jan and Theo had started building our means of escape over the Maas. In their workshop they had all the materials needed for the building of four boats, if you can call them that. Each boat or canoe was about five foot long and 18 inches wide (150 X 45 cm). The ribs or frame was made of two by one inch Oregon and the covering was plywood. They worked for days, but being cabinetmakers and carpenters they had no difficulties.

They painted the boats black for night camouflage. They could not be tested, but according to the makers they should be alright as far as buoyancy and water proofing were concerned. The rest was in God's hands.

We now waited for a favourable moonless night. The date was set on one of such nights, but I can't remember when it was. I suppose it would be easy enough to ascertain which week of January had the darkest nights in 1945.

One afternoon we visited Fraus and Conny van Meegeren's parents. We learned there that both had been successful in crossing the Maas. They had been able to send a coded message via the Dutch news on the B.B.C.

This was an amusing story really. When we were in hiding in the chicken shed for all those weeks, we had a number of old weekly magazines called 'Panorama'. It had a serialized detective story called *"Niemand speelt Schoppen Vrouw"* (Nobody plays the Queen of Spades). Because we did not have the last episode, the outcome of the story was the subject of much discussion and guessing and actually haunted us for some time.

When Mr. van Meegeren Sr. told us that they had received the message: "Nobody plays the Queen of Spades", we knew that their was no doubt that they had made it.

The fact that they had made it encouraged us no end in what we were about to undertake. If we had known then what we learned after from Conny, we probably would have given it another thought.

Fraus and Conny knew of a canoe stored in a garage at a friend's place near the Maas river.

To cut a long story short, they attempted crossing during one night, where discovered by a German searchlight and shot at with machine guns. They jumped out of the canoes and swam across the icy cold river, made it to the English occupied west bank and could not find a Tommy for at least twenty minutes. The English army was resting.

Anyway, we took leave of Mr and Mrs van Meegeren. Mr van Meegeren gave us one cigar, which we were to smoke between us when we should make it safely to the other side.

The day of action had arrived. The four scows, which staked up like some steel frame chairs, were put on a short ladder like sled, or a sled like

ladder. Inside the boats we had white sheets, to be used for camouflage in the snow.

During the day we went to an address close to the river-bank, from where we were to cross a meadow and launch our boats.

I have no idea where we were, or who was harbouring us. We (Paul and I) just blindly followed the 'local boys'. At the time it was not important to know those details, what's more, we never could give away names or places, if we were caught.

We spent some long hours waiting for the night. Then we went about covering our legs from the ankles to the thighs with white strips of sheeting. A whole sheet went over each boat, which we loaded over our heads and shoulders.

A paddle, made by our 'shipwrights' was clamped inside each boat. Somewhere late in the evening we went on our way. Yes, the night was dark, but from both sides of the river, searchlight beams were playing up and down the sky and the banks, changing the night into day, with the glistening snow reflecting every bit of light.

To make things worse, we found that the snow had a crust on ice on it. Every step we made sounded like an explosion in the still of the night. During the day, the sun had thawed some of the snow to the mash stage and after dark the top layer of about 3/4 inch had frozen into a sheet of ice.

But we carried on. I never knew how far it was from the house to the river. Maybe 100 or 200 meters? Who cared?

After proceeding for about three minutes, then, all of a sudden I could hear the crackling of the ice at a different frequency, not the careful step and cadence we used. The others had heard it too. I went down on my knees and bent forward. The boat covered my whole body that way and the sheet must have made it near invisible in the whit snow.

Then I heard a German voice saying:

"Wass war then dass?" (What was that?)

"Ich habe es doch laufen gesehen!" (I saw it walk!)

I was sweating the sweat of fear. It felt as if I was sweating hot blood. I prayed as I never had prayed before. I then heard one German say that he was going to get his gun. Evidently they had been on an off duty stroll or something.

The other German did not feel like staying on his own. They must have been as scared as we were. Fancy, seeing four spooks slowly advancing through the snow. Whatever, we used the opportunity to scramble back to the point of departure. We salvaged our boats, because they were our cover with their sheets on top.

I think the two Germans did not report their experience, for fear of punishment by their superiors for not having carried their arms or for running away. Anyway, nothing happened: even the next day. They could have followed the tracks in the snow. But nothing happened. Providence?

We spent a miserable night in the icy cold living room, waiting for daylight. We decided we had enough of this part of the front line. The Knops boys decided to go to a village further south, Steyl, where they knew a convent practically built on the water's edge, about four and a half kilometres south of Venlo.

So we trekked south with our sled and four scrows and brought it to a remote place, where it was hidden behind a hill. We then went to this convent. As far as I can remember, Theo and Jan learnt there that the next day the whole area where their parents lived was to be evacuated to Friesland, some three hundred kilometres to the north. They then decided that they would go home to assist their parents in the awful business of leaving their home and whatever was in store for them.

Their three hundred kilometre trek to Friesland would be the subject of another epic, but would not be part of this, my story.

Paul and I stayed in the convent. We went to a make-shift cellar chapel where Mass was said. We were the only young males there, a rather rare commodity at that stage of the German occupation. Most other lay people, refugees all, were women, old men and children. The convent belonged and was occupied by the German order of Ursulines. Most of the nuns were German. Somebody, I can't remember if it was a priest, one of the lay people or a nun, accosted us and soon found out what we were: two 'divers', who after having surfaced, had to dive again. A nun brought us through a long corridor to a room, not very large, with shelves and a couple of cloth-covered tables. It was the convents ironing room. The nun, who spoke German, told us we could stay there for the night. She warned us not to make any noises (sic!) because underneath our room, on the level of the

grassed bank, sloping down to the Maas river, German soldiers were billeted. They were manning machine-gun posts near the river's edge. We found that out later in the night, when we heard them in action.

There was a knock on the door and a nun entered. She asked, a bit confused: "Where are the German soldiers?" We thought it was hilarious. I said, "*Nein, die sind in eine andere Abteilungg*" (they are in a different department) and pointed to the floor. She was carrying a tray with sandwiches and obviously those were intended for "*Die Soldaten*". A little later they came again and brought a plate of sandwiches for us.

I guess, in the nun's eyes, both the Germans and we were victims of the war, away from home and deserved of their Christian neighbourly love. They did not discriminate.

That night we slept on the ironing tables. They were not too hard. They had a few layers of blankets on them and we had blankets for covers.

The next day we had breakfast in the refectory, where an elderly man talked to us and told us about the machine-guns and that the previous night a canoe with two young men in it, was shot to pieces and the two fortunately had jumped out into the icy water to be captured by the Germans later on.

By then we had made up our minds, that we were not going to try a stunt like that. We decided to walk south towards the frontline, in the hope of breaking through to the allies.

I should mention here that a lot of places names from then on were very vague to us. I wrote to Paul in December 1986 asking him to help me out. Not having immigrated he had revisited the path of our odyssey. He wrote a long letter, together with a set of topographic maps, in which he had traced the road we took to the best of his recollection. He also gave an account of his memories on that trip and thanks to him a lot of events came back, details I had forgotten. He went back to the places where we had left our scows a few years later.

The people on whose property we left them, and who had been evacuated at the time, found them when they returned after the war. They had used them as cupboards, by standing them on end and adding shelves across.

Paul mentions in his letter how he can't understand how cheeky we were, even reckless, as if deep inside us we had already given up, and just

lived dangerously the last hours of our "freedom". I had another rationale. I convinced myself that things could not get worse. Every time we hit a low, I said to myself and sometimes to Paul, "It can't get any worse, it has to get better, if anything." But somehow it always did get worse. And then there was the next faked consolation that it could not get worse. But it always did get worse.

If one had to plot our well-being or comfort factor against time in those days, it would have a sliding line with a few rises and the end eventually would have been beneath the zero line. But I kept up my spirits convincing myself that things could get worse; and therefore were not so bad yet. I never allowed myself to despair in the abyss of hopelessness. I had a fever-like will to make it. Dangers of the way were only incidental.

But looking back from a distance and knowing what could have happened, it is incredible that we had such luck or providential guidance, call it what you will. Our escape from the Venlo Gaol is a good example.

Chapter 9

January 1945

We set out for a little place called Reuver, where Paul knew a family he met as a 'diver' in Sevenum, relatives of his host family.

The fields were covered with snow. Paul recounts:

> *"The road from Steyl to Reuver (7km) was elevated like a dyke. As we walked there we heard popping noises and saw little clouds of snow bursting up. A farmer called out, warning us to run for it.*
>
> *It appeared that the British from the other side of the Maas could see us and fired a few rounds of mortars at us. We left the dyke and soon were out of reach of the fire."*

Eventually we arrived at Reuver and found the family we were looking for. These people were scared stiff having us there and got rid of us as soon as possible.

We kept walking on. Paul had another acquaintance in Swalmen, another 7km further south. We found the family Konings and were able to spend the night in their house and got a feed.

In the cellar they 'kept' a 'diver' nephew, an economics student at Tilburg university. He wondered if he should come with us but decided against it. His name was Piet van Cann.

Paul met him after the war, when he returned to Tilburg as an economics student. He remained in Swalmen, which was forcefully evacuated a few days later. He hid in a goat pen with some days supply of food. The goat was still there however. Lack of fodder made the goat protest in a very load voice. For his own safety he had to strangle it and spent more than a week in this stable, before the allies made their February push into Germany. Piet said, he wished he had come with us!

Between Reuver and Swalmen we happened to come on the main road again. Tall old oak trees were wired with dynamite charges and Paul insists that I wanted to cut the wires. I have no recollection of this and I am relying of Paul's memory who relates as follows:

> *"We were being watched by a German guard. It was close to a small castle, named 'Waterloo'.With great 'Chutspah' we went up to the guard and asked him if he had any food for us. He advised us to see the C.O. in the castle, he would know what to do with us (sic!). We walked on and chose to by-pass the castle with it's helpful army captain. After Swalmen we learned, that we should not go to Roermond, a rather large town on the Maas river. The population had been evacuated and all able men deported to Germany. The bridge over the Roer river (a tributary of the Maas) was occupied by S.S.*
>
> *So we went south eastward and towards the Roer away from Roermond. We desperately wanted to get over this river before we were cut off.*
>
> *The mayor of Vlodrop was a friend of the Closset. He was in hiding, but his wife and children were still in the mayor's residence. This now was our next goal."*

Paul and a friend had been in this area of years earlier to visit a miller to scrounge some flour. He could not remember exactly where it was, but thought it was a mill called 'Hammerhof', between Melick and Herkenbosch, 10 km from Swalmen.

Anyway, we walked into a farm-yard and talked to a farmer's wife, who fortunately trusted us, bade us come in and immediately asked us if we were hungry. Boy, were we hungry. We hadn't eaten for 24 hours. She gave us each a large sandwich of rye bread and meat and as she watched us wolf this down in no time at all, she gave us another one. After this one disappeared as quickly as the first one, she just put all kinds of food on the table and let

us have our fill. Gradually the room got busier. First a young man of our age came from another room, then an older one found us. We talked about wanting to go south and we were lucky to have stumbled on a cell of the underground, who knew exactly how to get us to the south.

The elder man took us out of the backdoor of the farm building and he walked till we came to a paddock. He said to step in exactly the same places where he put his feet, because we were walking through a mine field. This was approximately 150 meters to the bank of the river, where a small rowing boat was hidden in the reeds. He told us to strictly keep to a path he showed us. He rowed back and we were on our own. We walked on. By now it must have been afternoon. We came to a large farm and found that there were a large number of refugees. At a large table a baker and an offsider were preparing dough. We didn't ask any questions, but presumed the baker was a refugee himself. In those days every farm had it's own bread baking oven, fueled by the earlier mentioned prunings of pine forests.

They said they could not afford us any help, as there were over a hundred refugees there to house and feed, and as we were not hungry yet, we just marched on, general direction south.

Night fell and we were still walking along a rustic dirt road, more like a cart track. When we saw a weak light at some distance, we walked towards it. It was another farm and we knocked on the front door of the house.

We were let in and saw that every room was jam packed with women, children and old men. A young fellow was sitting on a bike, rear wheel mounted so he could pedal and work a dynamo, which provided the light in the room. We were soaked by rain or sleet and some kind spirit let us near a stove and gave us some bread. Later we slept in the barn on straw.

The next day we continued our trek and at some stage we came across a German patrol. Their uniforms were five sizes too large and their rifles were bigger than they. This was the *'Volks sturm'*, the people's army; boys of 13 to 16 years old, Germany's last-ditch defenders. They had just finished practice shooting on a road-side crucifix, the Christ figure ravaged. (Spes Patria!)

From Melick to Vlodrop was only five kilometers. We arrived there towards noon. The mayor's house was a nice villa surrounded by a fairly large garden, with a gate and a drive way leading to the front door.

As we walked up and came past a window we saw two or three Germans sitting in the room. We looked at them and they looked back at us. We walked calmly past the front door and went around the back, to a side door.

Mrs Mooren, the mayor's wife, opened up for us, recognized Paul and made us welcome. She did not know where her husband was. He had been a fugitive from the Germans for a few years.

The Germans in the house were billeted there and according to Mrs Mooren harmless and fed up to the back teeth by the lost war. She assured us that we had nothing to fear from them. But, all the same, we wisely stayed out of sight as much as possible.

We stayed at the Mooren's villa a few days. There was enough food and we slept in an alcove under a stairway leading from the second floor to the attic. Why? I don't know. It would not have protected us in case of a search.

Paul kind of collapsed after the strenuous 'long march.' It must have been the reaction to all the strain and would be bravado. Anyway, Mrs Mooren summoned the local G.P., who couldn't do much else than prescribe rest and good food.

Paul thinks we stayed nearly a week in Vlodrop. We probably did, considering that he was strong enough for the next episode of our odyssey.

The message came that Vlodrop had to be evacuated because the front was coming closer. The British army was on the move from the south. This was after the collapse of the last German offensive in the Ardennes and the Battle of Bastogne.

We decided to go south rather than wait for the Germans to transport us to Germany, a trip I certainly would not have been able to recount now.

There were a rabbit and two hens and a rooster in a shed in the yard, family pets of the 3 boys. Of course they could not stay behind and taking them was impossible for simple logistical reason. So I had to be butcher again. I had never killed a rabbit before but had heard how it should be done. So it had to be done. The hens and rooster likewise. I can't remember if we took the carcases with us or simply left them there,

We loaded a few essential on a ladder and fastened a rope on the first rung. We used this ladder the same way as we had done with the four boats. There still was enough snow to use the ladder as a sled.

With the Mayor's family stayed their maidservant whose family had a farm in Posterholt, approximately three kilometres from Vlodrop. So we went on the way to Posterholt. We came across fields where Germans were laying mines. Someone warned us, that the dirt road we were on, could have mines too.

We trusted that they were anti-tank mines and would not detonate with our weight. On the other hand, we reasoned that the frost probably had made the detonation pins useless. Whatever, after a slow trip of a few hours we arrived at Posterholt. The Mooren family was put up in the farm house and Paul and I found refuge in the yard.

There was a hole dug of about 1.5m depth. In it were the sacks with wheat. We were put in on top of the wheat sacks, the entrance hole covered up with planks and the planks covered with straw. Then a cart was wheeled over the top of this grave. Food was entered with us and we were reasonably comfortable.

Fortunately we had to stay in there only one night. The next morning early we heard the rumble of gears and chains and engines and soon we were assisted in a resurrection from our grave. The Germans were in retreat. The British were in the village and we were free!

We had a copious breakfast in the kitchen of the farmhouse. The farmers wife made special *"pannekoek met spek en stroop"*, pancakes with bacon and treacle.

After that we could not be kept any longer by ten horses. We started another trip, this time to Susteren, about 20km to the south west, where there was a reception centre for refugees.

After a few hours walk, we were overtaken by and army truck. It stopped and we got a lift to Susteren. There is not much to tell after that. The war for us was over, we were safe. We were transported to Maastricht, where Paul's parents and my brother Joep lived. They were alright.

I would not stay there. I had but one wish, to go to Vaals, where my girlfriend lived, and another brother, Fred and his family. They were

alright, too. My girlfriend, whose being had inspired me to do do what I did, had given me up for dead and had found solace with an American.

That was when I collapsed and had to see a doctor.