GLIMPSES INTO THE LIFE

OF

A YOUNG GIRL

IN NAZI OCCUPIED HOLLAND

DURING

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(as told by Ann Von Meyenfeldt to Denham Kelsey, a fellow resident and friend at the Berwick Retirement Community in Comox, B.C.)

INTRODUCTION

In a piece which I wrote last year about another resident, "Cor" Spoke, I talked of the fact that many of the people here have "done interesting things" and that some "have coped bravely, and with remarkable presence of mind, in extremely challenging situations, demonstrating the resilience of the human spirit when faced with adversity and evil".

Ann Von Meyenfeldt is another one of these. Some of her story deserves to be set down, particularly I believe for the benefit of young people who haven't experienced the upheavals and horrors of war, or who may not have ever been made aware of the depths of evil to which human beings and their societies can descend.

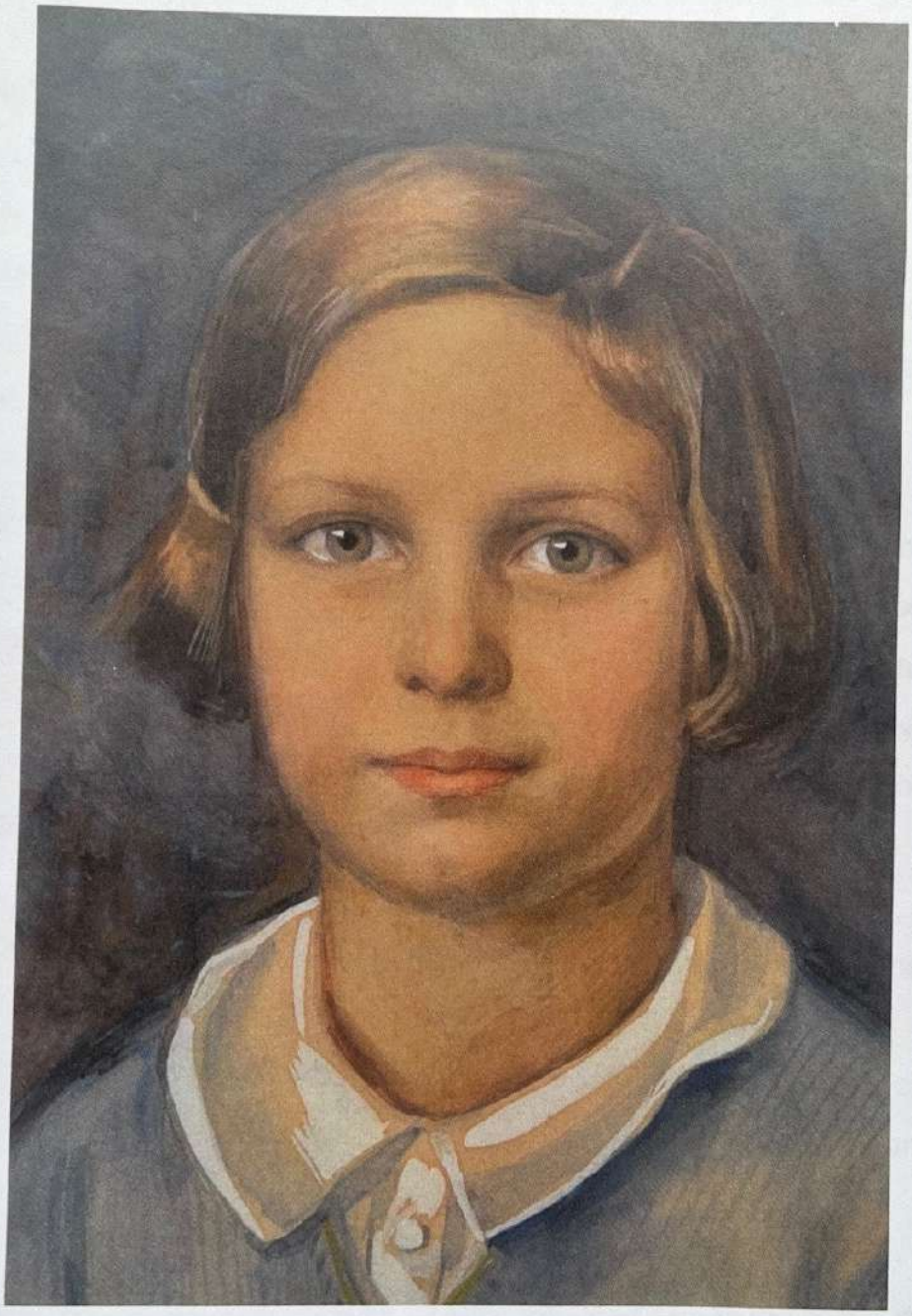
Denham Kelsey, March, 2018

ANN VON MEYENFELDT (NEE VAN DER GRAAF)

Ann was born in Amsterdam on December 8, 1923 to her Mother Clazina Woud and Father Ari. The little painting below shows Ari (on the right) and his twin brother Simon as teen-age boys:

Simon married Clazina's sister, Annie. The two closely-knit families, who had important connections in Amsterdam, were perhaps typical of the upper middle class of prosperous trading people of Holland at the time. The children were not catered to or showered with affection. Ann cannot remember her mother or father ever commenting favorably on her

appearance, but they must have been proud of her because when she was about eight they commissioned a local artist to paint her picture. The artist spent hours studying her face, and for the first time it occurred to Ann that she might be worth looking at. Indeed she was, as the painting testifies:



(Incidentally, the painting now hangs by Ann's bed in her suite at Berwick, and she tells me she quite often has happy conversations with that lovely young lady!)

It was a comfortable and largely uneventful childhood for Ann, growing up with a younger sister in a stable family, studying hard and doing well at a good school. She concentrated

on the Arts, rather than the Sciences. She became fluent in English, German and French, and delved into the works of great writers in those languages. She loved studying the History of Art. She was also fairly athletic, shining at grass hockey. She enjoyed skating for miles along the frozen canals in winter, as pictured in some of those wonderful old Dutch historical paintings which come to mind.

But suddenly this benign and civilized world was shattered. Without warning, in the early hours of May 10, 1940 the Germans swept across the Netherlands. The Dutch had hoped to remain neutral, but that was not the Nazi plan. German military superiority was overwhelming. The brave Dutch army stood no chance, and was forced to surrender. On May 13 the Dutch Cabinet fled to London with Queen Wilhelmina, where it remained in exile for five years.

Ann recalls being in the garden with her mother a few days later, when a lone British reconnaissance plane flew over them. German anti-aircraft batteries crippled it, but two men managed to get out and parachute from the stricken aircraft. The Germans shot them. As they slumped lifeless to the ground Ann sobbed: "Mother, Mother; they killed them! It isn't fair! It isn't fair!". "Ann, Dear", her mother replied, "this is war, and there is no such thing as fairness any more".

The Nazis considered the Dutch to be of the "superior" Ayran race, like themselves, and accordingly were initially less oppressive in the Netherlands than in other countries they occupied. Their main goals were the Nazification of the people, the creation of a large-scale aerial attack and defense system, and the integration of the Dutch economy into the German one.

So Ann at seventeen finished out her Grade XI and returned to school in the Fall for the last year of High School. Things were beginning to change, insidiously and ominously. Students had to scissor out of their textbooks works by Jewish authors, such as the those of the poet Heine. Jewish friends had to stitch Stars of David onto their clothes. Jews were not allowed to use public transportation. Some of them disappeared, and there were frightening rumors that they were being killed.

As the Dutch became aware of and horrified at the Nazis' determination to get rid of the Jews, and as stories began to circulate of incidents of unspeakable humiliation and brutality by the invaders, opposition stiffened, coalescing into numerous "underground" resistance groups.

With High School behind her, Ann had hoped to continue on to University. To be admitted, though, students were required to sign an oath of allegiance to the Nazi regime. Ann and several of her friends refused to do this. She managed to get a night-shift job with the Red Cross in the blood transfusion department of a hospital, cleaning and sterilizing the equipment. She had a special pass to allow her to be out after the curfew (8 PM to 4 AM). She remembers how strange it was to be in the deserted streets. She was often challenged by Nazi Wehrmacht soldiers who were patrolling them. She acknowledges that these ordinary soldiers were generally respectful, once they had checked her Red Cross pass.

Over the next four years Ann became active in several resistance groups.

She and a small group of girls like herself learned that the Germans had ordered all the remaining Jews in Amsterdam to assemble in a theatre in the centre of the city to be registered. Her group knew all too well that the Nazi plan was to get rid of these these people by sending them away for slave labour or even extermination. So the girls managed to contact some of the Jews who were parents, and to persuade them to turn over their children to their care. Some were just babies. The plan was to secrete these children to relative safety in farming communities far from the city, where brave Dutch families would be provided with forged papers for them and would pass them off as their own and look after them.

Any sort of resistance activity like this was dangerous. Informers and members of the dreaded Gestapo were everywhere. It was hard to know who might be trusted, if anyone. Being caught meant merciless torture to force out information. Ann and her colleagues were given cyanide pills, and told to commit suicide if they were arrested.

Ann is still haunted by the memory of one heart-rending occasion when she was anxiously urging the Jewish parents of their baby boy that it was time to leave, lest they miss their

train and be caught out after curfew. "This child is not a piece of furniture. He is our son. Please give us just a few more minutes with him", the father pleaded, "we may never see him again". They never did; they perished in the holocaust.

Over 75% of Holland's Jews died at the hands of the Nazis. Sixty thousand Jews were deported to Auschwitz; only nine hundred and seventy-two survived. Thirty-four thousand Jews were deported to Sobibor; only two – two out of thirty-four thousand - lived to return to the Netherlands.

Ann hadn't much experience looking after babies. On another occasion a fussy elderly lady on a train saw her fumbling efforts to change the diaper of a baby boy, and insisted in trying to help. Ann remembers her desperate efforts to conceal the fact that the baby had been circumcised, which would probably have "given the game away", with disastrous consequences.

She also tells of situation in which two young Jewish boys she was escorting were excited about being on the train, and were babbling away happily about their adventure. She was afraid that their chatter might draw dangerous attention, and she kept trying to hush them up, without much success.

On another of her trips to Friesland she stuffed a precious store of ration cards into her waistline, simulating the bulge of a girl well on in pregnancy.. The cards had been taken in a daring raid on a Nazi office, and were needed for the Jewish children she and her colleagues had rescued and taken to their adopting families far from the city.

Ann also became a link in a chain of Resistance members who clandestinely drew rough maps of German troop movements and then passed them secretly to contacts who had ways of getting them to England. One evening her father confronted her, furious at fact he had found maps hidden in her mattress. He told her to pack up and get out immediately. He feared that the Gestapo might find out about the activity, spelling disaster for himself and the sixty people he employed, and their families. The fact that he had been suspicious of her was frightening, and she was anxious that he might give her away. Such was the atmosphere of mistrust, even within families.

Ann moved in with a girl friend who appeared to be living innocuously with her "husband" in a large house which had been abandoned by a Jewish family. Her friend didn't tell her that she and the 'husband' were not married, but in fact were a team of gun experts, working away in their basement, repairing and reassembling guns dropped into Holland by the British. Ann sometimes went out to the "drop areas" to retrieve the parachuted packages of gun parts and ammunition.

Ann learned much later that about the same time her sister Els had joined another Resistance group, taking photos of German troop activities with a camera rigged in her purse. Like the maps, the photos were passed through a chain of contacts to England

Amid all this danger and intrigue, life was not without lighter times. Ann and I were chatting the other day and the conversation somehow turned to Dutch paintings, and in particular Vermeer's famous 'View of Delft'. I asked if she knew Delft. "I certainly do", she replied with a smile: "I had a boy friend there, and I sometimes cycled out to Delft from Amsterdam to visit him". It is to be noted that Delft is 68 km. from Amsterdam, and that her bike had wooden wheels, bikes with rubber tires having long since been confiscated by the Germans. "It always seemed the wind was against me - but at least the ground was flat!". "The things one will do for love!" she says.

It may be useful and interesting to pause briefly to think about the position of the Dutch people in the larger context of the times of some of the momentous events of the war. In June of 1941 Hitler had attacked Russia. On December 7, 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, bringing the United States into the War. The Japanese swiftly swept through south-east Asia, seizing the Dutch East Indies. Until the summer of 1942 the German military campaigns seemed victorious wherever they were taken. They advanced far into Russia, badly beat the British in North Africa and held many occupied countries in an iron grip. The Japanese were also riding high in Asia. At last, in late 1942 two events signaled the beginning of a turn in the Allies' fortunes: Montgomery won a decisive victory in the Battle of El Alamein in North Africa, and the Russians won their first victory in the Battle of

Stalingrad. But years of struggle, with uncertain outcome, lay ahead. The return to northern Europe on "D-Day" (June 1944) was two years away, and after that there was nearly another year of immense effort before Europe was finally freed in May of 1945.

As the Germans after 1942 were increasingly stretched by the demands of fighting on several fronts, and faced the previously unimagined spectre of defeat, they became increasingly desperate and vicious. They "tightened the screws" everywhere in the Netherlands. They responded to acts of resistance with extreme violence. They raided universities, executed hundreds of hostages, bombarded neighborhoods, and in the case of one town, Putten, deported the entire male population to labor camps. By the end of the war, 387,000 Dutch citizens had been forced to relocate to Germany to labor as slaves in factories that were often the focus of fierce bombing by the Allies.

As an aside, a Dutch friend I had years ago told me of his experiences as one of these deportees. He convinced his German captors that he was mentally retarded. They gave him a simple job in a munitions factory of screwing detonators into shells. He somehow devised a way to adjust these detonators so that they would go off prematurely, perhaps even while still in the cannons. He liked to imagine the chaos he may have caused. He was never caught.

All possible resources – food, clothing, metals, coal – were stripped from the country and sent to Germany. In late 1944 all supplies of food and fuel to the western provinces of the Netherlands were cut off, leaving 4.5 million people destitute. 22,000 people starved to death. To make matters even worse, this "Hunger Winter" was one of the coldest on record. Countless thousands suffered from malnutrition, disease and exposure to the bitter cold.

Ann remembers munching on a tulip bulb as a snack. She also recalls seeing people trying to hack pieces of meat from the carcass of an emaciated horse that had collapsed and died on her street. The meat was too tough to chew, but they could make broth from it, helping them survive.

Ann was relatively fortunate. She and her two companions in the large house moved into one room which they insulated from the cold as best they could. There had a small stove,

and they broke up chairs and other furniture for fuel to do a little cooking and provide some warmth. She still had her job with the Red Cross, and her boss there had farming relatives in the country who managed to get some food to him, which he shared with his staff.

These were dark times. But these darkest hours were "just before the dawn". The Allies had liberated the strategic port of Antwerp on September 4, 1944. Although its facilities were largely intact. the port was unusable because the Germans still held the Scheldt Estuary, which connected Antwerp to the North Sea. The First Canadian Army was given the task of clearing the Estuary. The resulting offensive was a high point in Canadian history. The troops fought gallantly. Over 7,000 Canadians were killed or wounded. But by the end of November access to Antwerp had been secured, enabling massive shipments of military equipment, and food and supplies for the people, to pour in to that part of Europe.

On May 5, 1945 Allied troops, lead by the Canadian Seaforth Regiment, under their commanding officer Brigadier H. P. (Budge) Bell-Irving, liberated Amsterdam. One commentator described the scene: "... as the convoy reached the outskirts of the city my impression was of thousands of still and silent Dutch citizens lining both sides of the road. Suddenly, as the convoy approached, the silence gave way to an outpouring of joy and gratitude that quickly spread to many thousands of voices, audible for miles." Ann was there.

Queen Wilhelmina in a radio broadcast in 1944 characterized her country as "a nation of heroes". This was an overstatement. Nations of heroes do not exist. But tens of thousands of ordinary human beings, men and women, in the Netherlands proved willing to accept great personal risks and to put everything, even life itself, at stake. They saved the country's soul.

Ann Von Meyenfeldt is one of them.

EPILOGUE

A few days after the liberation, Ann's parents hosted a gathering at their family home. There she met an unassuming Canadian Army Officer. Like her, he seemed rather ill at ease. They warmed to each other. Conversation flowed easily. She confided in him that, after all the excitement and joy of the liberation, she felt strangely let down and depressed, sadly wondering "what now?". He smiled kindly, and said that he understood very well, because he had similar feelings. Later in the party she learned that he was Budge Bell-Irving, the Commander of the forces which had just freed Amsterdam. The incident tells something about that man: while famously brave and formidable in battle, much decorated and an inspiring leader, he was still a modest, sensitive and caring human being.

Bell-Irving returned to civilian life in Vancouver, where he had a career in insurance and real estate, and was active in the life of the community. In 1978 he was appointed the 23rd Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia. With his beloved wife Nancy he served in this role with grace and dignity until 1983. He died in 2002 at the age of 89.

Ann married an old friend, a Dutchman. They emigrated to Vancouver, became teachers and raised a family of three children, two boys and a girl. Ann was a highly regarded and much loved French teacher at Magee High School.

Ann has often wondered what became of the Jewish children she helped save. Most of them were absorbed back into Jewish society after the war. Sadly, many ended up in Jewish orphanages, cut off from the Dutch families who had protected and nurtured them. There was no way of tracking them. But one day, fifty or more years later, she found herself in conversation with a man in Vancouver who was describing his wartime childhood in the Netherlands. As he talked on, and told of details, it gradually dawned on her that he was one of the children she had spirited away to safety. He had eventually emigrated to Canada, prospered, and raised a fine Canadian family.