

MEMORIES OF THE GERMAN OCCUPATION OF THE NETHERLANDS DURING WW2

By Anne Koning



Anna Maria Bakker's identity card (reverse side) Sept. 1941

Anna aged 17 July 1943

My name is Anne Koning. I was born Anna Maria Bakker in the north of Holland on 9 May, 1926. I just turned 14 the day before the Nazis attacked (10 May 1940). I still remember the helpless feeling of disbelief expressed by me family and my parent's friends who gathered outside our village council chambers to read the official proclamation. It took only five days from invasion to total capitulation. The Dutch army was pathetically undermanned and totally unprepared for any kind of modern warfare. They believed naively that by inundating the eastern part of Holland the Germans would be magically halted. Deep down in people's minds the invasion was expected, as at first Poland and later other parts of Europe were overrun by the Nazis, but the Dutch people hoped against all the odds that like in the 1914-18 war Holland might have managed to stay neutral. But it was not to be.

The Dutch royal family fled to England. Crown Princess Juliana and her family later went to Canada and stayed there for the duration. The Dutch people had mixed feelings about this. Staunch royalists agreed with Queen Wilhelmina, as staying would have meant co-operation with the Nazis, whereas others saw it as a betrayal of the Dutch people who were suffering under German occupation, while the royal family "saved their own skins". Their leaving the country led to spirited debates among people for and against the move. My own (immature) opinion was that I couldn't blame them for getting out while the going was good. What was actually best for the country was hard to say anyway. My dad did not agree with the move at all. He thought it was an act of great cowardice and was most vocal in his praise of King Leopold of Belgium who stayed on when Belgium was invaded. Ironically after the

war King Leopold was accused of collaboration with the Nazis while Queen Wilhelmina was abundantly praised for her foresight in getting out of Holland to lead a government in exile. No doubt each of them meant to do what they thought was best at the time.

It did not take long for the invaders to make their presence felt. My family lived in a village called Noord-Scharwoude, in Australia we would probably call it a country town. There were (and still are) good shops, schools, churches and pubs. The town itself was situated in the midst of an agricultural area; my father was a market gardener. [The family were Catholics] All their lives my mum and dad struggled to bring up a family of ten children, a normal sized family in Holland in those days; families with less than three or four children were the exception. In spite of hard work and near poverty families we were happy and contented. When war broke out my parents already had seven children, but because dad practically grew everything himself – potatoes, vegetables, some grain, a house cow for milk, hens for eggs, some pigs and goats for meat we never went hungry and during the war many people were fed besides our own family.

For the last two years of the war my parents fostered a little boy named Koos who came from The Hague. His parents were unable to feed their family adequately because of the stringent food rationing during the latter part of the war. Koos had been very ill when his mother brought him to my parents. She got our address from a priest who formerly was stationed in our parish and who told them my mum and dad would look after him, which indeed they did, without any hesitation whatsoever. It was an accepted principle that one more mouth to feed made no difference. Nearly every other family in the village took in little refugees either from Amsterdam or one of the larger cities and shared what must have looked like an abundance of food to them. I suppose potatoes and beans followed by barley porridge looks pretty good when you have been eating flower bulb casserole, which many city people had to resort to towards the end of the war.

Our own meals were pretty plain during that time, as “luxury” items like sugar, chocolate, cakes, biscuits, tea and coffee, cocoa etc. were no longer available even if you had the money and the ration coupons. Meat was scarce to put it mildly; you only had what you (clandestinely) grew yourself, all livestock being requisitioned by the German army. City people had none at all; country people were issued with permits to grow one or two pigs a year. You faced the death penalty if you grew more to sell to others. In spite of that people took incredible risks for the simple reason of keeping yourself and your family alive. The same went for milk, butter and bread. We grew wheat; ground it in an old coffee grinder, each child taking a turn. It was pretty hard work. But at least we never went to bed hungry.

Towards the end of the war streams of city people came to forage for food. Although my dad did not have enough in the end to sell anymore, everyone who called in was given a feed. People who arrived towards the end of the day when it was nearly curfew time and who could not go any further or risk being show were given a bed for the night in the shed. My dad would spread fresh straw on the floor and people were only too thankful to sink exhaustedly into the straw and sleep until the next day, when they would be on their way again in search of more food. And I'm not talking about tramps or hoboes but respectable family's fathers and mothers who just were desperate to feed their starving children.

At first curfew was declared from 12am until 4am, but gradually it shortened, first from 10pm until 4am, then 10pm to 6am and in the end people had to be inside by 8pm. As a teenager social life was practically non-existent apart from what you organised at your own or friends' homes. Then you had to go home before curfew or stay the night. Picture theatres showed only German propaganda films, so you hardly ever went to see them out of principle, there were no dances allowed, alcohol was unavailable (young men endeavoured to make some horrible type of home brewed schnapps and got very ill in the process). Only the girls who had relationships with German soldiers (preferably officers) were assured of a good time. They were looked upon as the worst kind of traitors, as there was no political principle involved unlike members of the Dutch Nazi party for instance who genuinely thought Hitler was the saviour of the master race, but only greed for the good life and a totally selfish attitude towards the suffering of others. There were rare instances of genuine affection between German soldiers and Dutch girls, but they were the exception.

But back to the curfew. In Europe the summer evenings are very long; it does not get dark until almost 11pm, so you can imagine the feeling of imprisonment when you had to be inside the house by 8pm. This did not go down very well with the young people in particular. In villages like ours there normally were not any German soldiers actually stationed, but they made regular patrols in trucks to see if there were any people in the streets. When the trucks cruised past the villagers used to sit tensely behind their curtains hoping no one would be foolish enough to break the curfew.

In the neighbouring village named Waarland a young man stood in his parent's front garden when soldiers in a truck drove past. They ordered him to go inside, but he looked at them defiantly and taunted "I'm not on the street, I'm on private property, and so what are you going to do about it?" Again they shouted "Inside!" to which he answered "Just make me!" Well, they made him alright, shot him dead right there and then, right in front of his

distraught parents who were watching the episode through the window. And the soldiers in the truck drove off as if nothing had happened. Not many people defied curfew after that.

During the first few months of the occupation on the surface life went on much the same as before. Apart from the hated German soldiers being evident in the towns, shops, pubs etc. and the news in the papers and on radio heavily biased in favour of the war effort (not because the newspaper proprietors wanted to report it that way, but if they didn't their presses were confiscated), most foodstuffs and clothing were still available. But it did not take long for rationing to be introduced. At first it was only food, but generally everything was "Op de bon" (on the coupon). Meat, butter, eggs, bread, sugar, coffee, tea, cigarettes and tobacco, soap and other cleaning agents, petrol, bike tyres, clothes. Everything got so scarce that surrogates were invented for almost every commodity. Substitute tea and coffee was brewed from some sort of toasted grain. I can still remember the foul smelling brew and the awful taste. (The first cup of real coffee after the war was absolute bliss and when chocolate came off rations I ate seven chocolate bars and was thoroughly sick.)

Distribution offices were set up throughout the county; I worked as a clerk in one of them. Only people who could prove they were genuine inhabitants of a town (through ID cards which were issued to everyone over 15 years of age) were supplied with a regular number of ration cards. I am very proud to say that our office was infiltrated by resistance workers. I was one person who was taken into their confidence although I was only 17 at the time. Perfectly forged ID cards were handed in to us. The reason why they needed a couple of clerks they could trust was that in a village everybody knows one another and untrustworthy clerks would realise in one second flat that the persons on the ID cards were non-existent.

We would take the ID cards to the Manager (who was a resistance fighter himself, although I did not know that at the time), he signed the necessary forms and ration cards were issued which were used to obtain food for young men ["onderduikers" or under divers] who had gone into hiding from the Nazis. A young police officer used to come and collect them, ostensibly for the recruits at the police station. I didn't even tell my parents about all this going on, how I could ever have kept my mouth shut I'll never know, but it seemed quite natural at the time.

Apart from the rationing the Germans requisitioned fodder for their horse from farmers, petrol, coal, everything they needed to keep the war machine going. During the bitter winter [the Hunger Winter] of 1944 fuel for heating got so scarce that every tree along the local highway got cut down, illegally of course. This had to be done in the middle of the night, which meant breaking curfew. My husband Dick (I didn't know him at the time) was

chopping down a tree with some friends in their village main street of all places when they got caught by the local police sergeant, who happened to be a Nazi collaborator. Dick and his mates spent two days and nights in the local a lock-up. The sergeant notified the German authorities but apparently they had bigger fish to fry, so the lads were let off with a warning, which was extremely fortunate, and should have made them more cautious. The tree was confiscated and before they were allowed to go home the policeman made them saw and chop up the tree for firewood and stack it in his backyard. Well, believe it or not, the next night they hid behind the sergeant's house, waited until he went on his rounds, loaded all the chopped wood onto a cart and were about to take it home when he unexpectedly returned. My husband's cousin, who was, along with my husband, a member of the local resistance group, got out the pistol he had obtained previously and shot the policeman dead. Then they fled, still taking the wood with them and stupidly stacked it in the cousin's backyard. Next day the Gestapo came to the village to investigate the shooting. They meant to do a house to house search, but on information received from the policeman's wife (who knew the boys had been in the lock-up the previous night, went straight to the cousin's house, found the gun and arrested him. For six months his family heard nothing from him; they didn't know if he was alive or dead. But when the war ended in May 1945 he turned up alive. Very thin and weak, he had been held all that time in Scheveningen prison, a Dutch prison where mainly resistance workers were housed.

Evert town and village formed their own resistance group, which in turn were linked nationally and had contact with the Dutch government in exile. They formed a powerful force in the silent war and were constantly supplied with weapons and information from their commanding officers in England. Many German plans were frustrated because of the concentrated efforts of the resistance fighters. Although at times they were in great danger, they also shared a sense of adventure. Members were recruited by word of mouth; people seemed to instinctively know whom to trust, who were Nazi sympathisers and who were nice enough people but could not be relied on to be discreet. The resistance movement also helped the escape back to England of pilots whose planes had come down over Holland and been forced to bail out. The resistance workers hid the pilots until an escape route was arranged. That could be dicey at times, because the Germans knew when a plane had come down in a certain location and in no time they would have hundreds of soldiers out searching the farms and surrounding fields. I remember a pilot being hidden in a bakery (the whole village knew where he was). When the soldiers came to search the houses, they put him in an oven; fortunately it happened to be cooling down after a baking session. The poor chap must have

been terrified. They searched the bakery but they never looked in the ovens and the resistance boys got their charge safely back to England.

That sort of thing happened all the time. To some resistance fighters it was some sort of game, albeit a very dangerous one. At the time I had a boyfriend who was a member of the resistance. He told my dad a little bit of cargo had been dropped that night. Dropped meant exactly that: weapons etc. dropped from Allied planes at pre-arranged locations. Could my dad please store this cargo in our house for a day or two? My dad had no idea what this “cargo” was, but being a good patriot, he asked no questions and said it was quite alright. It turned out to be two boxes of dirty big Sten guns so for three nights I slept with this arsenal under my bed, until it was declared safe to move them. What actually happened was that unknown to us the Germans had been searching for those self-same guns in several farmhouse because they observed the drop and knew that most probably the cargo consisted of weapons. They arrived at the dropping field just a few minutes too late. My boyfriend and his mates could not go to their usual hiding place because it was crawling with Germans, so in desperation he came to our house, stashed the lot under MY bed, hoping the Germans wouldn't suspect the loot to be right in the middle of town. Luckily they gave up the search and everyone in our house heaved a sigh of relief when the boys came to collect “their little bit of cargo”.

During the last year of the war the black market flourished to a scandalous degree. No matter how much suffering there is, there always seem to be certain types or parasites who don't scruple to get rich on someone else's misery. City people who had nothing to eat, who saw their own children starve, came to the country to trade their jewellery and valuables for a handful of food. Unscrupulous operators even traded wedding rings for a litre of milk or a kilo of wheat. I had a girlfriend whose father was a black marketeer. Their attic was stacked with dinner sets, linen, and jewels, anything of value, because shrewdly he figured that after the war German currency, which was used in Holland during the war, would be worthless. Stupidly, the man boasted of his hoard to some cronies in the pub. Some resistance workers sitting nearby overheard him. That night his attic was broken into and every last bit of property stored there taken away. No-one ever found out what happened to it.

When it started to look like Hitler's war wasn't going too well, he wanted to step up the war effort by recruiting young men from the occupied countries. Understandably they didn't volunteer too enthusiastically, so a scheme was devised called Arbeidsdienst (Labour Service) in which young men went into hiding, staying with people in other villages keeping out of sight during the day, only joining the family in the living quarters after curfew. In

remote rural areas they sometimes helped farmers to work in the fields, but this was very dangerous because the Germans patrolled outlying country roads with big trucks, enter villages without any warning round up all young men who fell into the right category. They invaded every house, look under beds, in wardrobes and toilets and without so much as a change of clothes drag them into the trucks and transport them to the munitions factories.

Thousands of men were taken this way and many did not come back, getting killed in the air raids or dying from starvation or disease. The attitude of the majority of Dutch people was one of unmitigated hatred of all Germans. Although to be perfectly fair, many of them were also forced into the war against their will, particularly towards the end.

A certain percentage of Dutch citizens were collaborators or members of the Dutch Nazi Party. They were often installed as mayors of towns and given jobs as high ranking police officers or given cushy jobs in government departments. Then there were the good time girls who did not care what nationality they were, they only went out with the Germans to have a good time and have nice things given to them. The day the war ended many of them were dragged out of their houses by resistance members who shaved all their hair off and painted big red swastikas onto their bald skulls. The same girls went with the Allied soldiers who occupied Holland after the war. They bought themselves a nice wig and Bob's your uncle. Some even married Americans or Canadians after first having been Nazi molls.

Many Jews lived in Holland, particularly in the business centre of Amsterdam. Soon after the occupation they were forced to wear a yellow Star of David to show they were Jewish. I knew a Jewish lady married to a gentile. One day she just disappeared, nobody knew where she had gone, but the neighbours had a strong suspicion she had gone into hiding, because the Nazis had started to round up Jews and send them to concentration camps. All the time she was hiding in a little cubby hole some friends had devised for her in their hay shed. All covered with hay on the outside, with some air vents to prevent her from suffocating, she stayed in the cubby hole all day; at night her husband would visit for a short while. This went well for a few months until one day a contingent of German soldiers arrived at the village. They drove straight to the hay shed and started to remove the hay until the planks of the cubby appeared. They smashed the cubby, dragged out the lady and took her away. Her name was Mrs Keppel. After the war Mr Keppel tried everything to find out what happened to her but nothing was ever heard from her again. I don't know if they ever found out who betrayed her. This sort of thing happened to many thousands of Dutch Jews who, together with millions of Jews from other countries perished in the concentration camps. This

is one of the blackest pages in the history of the human race and mankind should never be allowed to forget it.

Towards the end of the war the resistance movement turned into a highly efficient sabotage organisation. In the neighbouring village of Oudorp a railway bridge was blown up and large proclamations were posted everywhere to exhort people to supply the Nazis with information relating to the incident. When no information was forthcoming, men were picked up off the street, some old, some almost kids, and were taken away as hostages. Only allowed the clothes they stood up in, they were bundled into trucks and driven to an unknown prison camp. When there still no information forthcoming, several men were again picked up off the street, but this time they were lined up in a vacant lot in front of a crowd of school children on their way to school. Still the people kept quiet. Such was the feeling of the Dutch citizens at the time. All this happened a long time ago, but I clearly remember many incidents. The only thing I cannot recall is the rail strike of 1944, but the country was in such chaos, no food, no fuel, no electricity, no buses, the only public transport was trains which ran most erratically and then often got shot at by English Spitfires. I remember one such occasion when my sister and I were going to Amsterdam. The Spitfires flew over and started to dive for the train. The train stopped and all the passengers jumped out and hid under it. The planes started firing and would you believe they only fired at the carriage which carried a battalion of German soldiers, so it was pretty clear our resistance had given London the information about troop movements. If among all those memories I can't recall the rail strike it is no surprise really.

Notes by Cathy Koning, Anne and Dick Koning's daughter:

Mum wrote this document for my students' year 9 history classes in December 1985.

Her village was in the north of Holland, quite close to the sea. Allied bombers regularly flew overhead, especially towards the end of the war, heading for targets in Germany. The continuous drone of the aircraft was disconcerting; mum hated the sound, especially at night. Dad told me they saw mid-air battles and pilots ditching from the planes.

Mum told me she felt so distressed at seeing girls paraded through the street with shaved heads immediately after the war that she vomited on the spot. Mum felt the war took away her chance to have a normal peacetime teenage experience. Instead the years were filled with stress.

I have a lovely engraving of a water pump in Haarlem created by Dutch artist B A Bongers. It was given to my mother's family in exchange for food and board during the Hunger Winter of 1944-45.

Towards to end of the war very young German boys and old men were recruited to occupy the villages. Dad said that if he had been born in Germany he would not have been able to avoid army service. He was not taken away for work in the munitions factories because his father had died of tuberculosis when he was a young boy. He was the oldest child and had to work to support his family. In later years he read *The Age* newspaper closely. Whenever he intensely disliked a right wing political party's behaviour, he would call out "Fascists!"

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