

MY WAR MEMORIES      by Martha Bosma

My world war 11 memories go back to when I was seven years old. The sky was a brilliant blue, the beginning of a perfect day in May of 1940. We lived in the small village of Lutjegast, in the north of the Netherlands. Our family of eight and growing was finishing breakfast when we heard unusually loud traffic rumbling by on our street. We hastened out doors and stopped in our tracks in front of dad's barbershop watching what seemed to my eyes an endless parade of army trucks and tanks, occupied with grim-faced soldiers. The children clung to father's white barber jacket and mother's flowery apron. Small clusters of people started to gather in front of their homes. Silence hung between them, fear was in the air. I looked up at my parents but they stood there as if frozen in time. Even my dad the barber didn't seem to know what was happening. That was the beginning of five years of war. My little mind thought the world was coming to an end.

The teachers were there one day and gone the next. Either they were shipped to Germany or they went underground and retired teachers took their place. As children we didn't know what "underground" meant. Our parents lived by the motto: the less the kids know the better. Our flag as well as the orange banners and orange hair ribbons went into a hiding place. Orange represents the royal colour. Flowers such as marigolds were banned. Parents talked in whispers, fear was a constant companion. Things like food and clothing and electricity became scarce. Life in a village had its advantages. Most homes had some land to grow vegetables, fruit and berries on and we acquired quite the menagerie: three goats for milk, chickens for eggs and a pig for meat. It is true what they say about barbers, they hear the news first. Dad knew where the horsemeat or other contraband items were to be had. Mom learned to spin wool into yarn and taught her four daughters to knit and darn socks at a very young age. When school was out we had to knit ten rows before we could play. When the pig was ready for slaughter a butcher came to the house in the dark of night with the windows blackened while all the children were asleep upstairs and unaware what drama was taken place downstairs. The following days mom started the arduous task of processing the meat. Freezers or refrigerators were not in our vocabulary as yet.

Sometimes in clear daylight the soldiers gathered up all the bikes they could lay their hands on and lined them up two by two on the road to be shipped off to Germany, leaving people without transportation. My family kept their bikes as dad hid our bikes behind the property in a ditch and covered them with branches. Among the games we enjoyed was playing marbles. Even marbles were in short supply so we made our own out of clay and baked them in the oven. Chores were never ending. There were babies to mind, diapers to fold, shoes to polish, potatoes to peel, beans to string, dishes to wash, vegetable to weed, a barbershop to clean and tobacco leaves to process. The four girls spent hours taking old coats and suits apart so mom could sew the material into slacks for the boys and skirts for the girls. Everything was on rations. Eggs and tobacco products were used in bartering for basic necessities. Mother learned to make butter, cottage cheese, headcheese and soap.

Dad regularly visited the underground- driven village men to give them a shave and a haircut. One Sunday morning as the family was ready to go to church a German soldier stomped in demanding a haircut. Dad argued that the shop was closed for the Sunday and "Can't you see that the blinds are closed and the family is ready to go to

church?" After a heated discussion the angry soldier turned on his boots and slammed the door shut behind him. To me father became a hero of faith at that moment. He received plenty of harassments by the nazi sympathisers. One day he was literally kicked in his "you-know-what" while serving customers. He knew too much and they knew it. After that close call he went into hiding for six weeks. Often at night when a raid on the village was about to start there was a knock on a window and a voice would say: "Wiebe, get out of here." And dad would just slip out the backdoor. The children never knew where dad's hideout was. There was a lot of tension and secrecy at home. One of the worst punishments for the children was curfew, meaning we had to be inside while it was still light outside and we were aching to play hide and seek with the neighbour kids. This was as punishment after a German soldier was killed or a train derailed or after a raid on ration coupons by the resistant movement. They needed food rations for all the underground people.

Towards the end of the war an extremely cold winter multiplied the suffering of the people. Many died during this hunger winter. The Germans grabbed all available food, leaving us only with what ever we had hidden away from their sight. Fuel was all but unavailable. I recall sitting in a chilly classroom, with hands too cold to write. Periodically the teacher would let us do warm-up exercises between the benches. The Red Cross occasionally supplied the students with one orange each as well as vitamin C tablets. We ate those pills by the handful when the old teacher didn't see us taking them out of his closet.

Finally the bitter cold winter made way for spring and with it came renewed hope for a quick end to this horrible war. In spite of hunger pangs and many other discomforts the topic in the barbershop was about the LIBERATION. The air was pregnant with expectation; that's all us children heard the barbershop customers talk about. One day during recess a horse drawn wagon loaded down with frumpily dressed soldiers, rolled through our street returning to Germany with much less dignity than when they first invaded the Netherlands. A group of us older students (grades 6 and 7) followed the wagon at a safe distance sneering at them. We could feel the freedom beckoning. The teacher made us stay in after school because he said: "We were putting ourselves in harms way while he was in charge of us. Even mother got into a defiant act as she hung up the flag on the wash line before the war ended. She was ordered by threat of imprisonment to take it off or else..."

The first sign that the liberation of our town had finally begun came through a small broken coloured windowpane in church. A young fellow spotted the tanks moving along the distant canal. The news flew through the sanctuary like a wild storm. But apparently the news did not reach the preacher as he kept on droning along from the high pulpit. No sooner came The Amen, the people rushed out of there as if fleeing from a burning building. We ran on mass, men women and children towards the canal, across the "hoge brug" (high bridge), never mind our Sunday best clothes and our polished shoes, and cheered on the so long-awaited Canadians, our freedom fighters. Chocolate bars were thrown from the tanks and young girls were pulled onto the tanks. After five years of brutal German occupation freedom never felt better. Some Germans were still holed up in a house nearby, shots were fired and the house started to burn. Street celebrations lasted long into the evening. Even the pastor left his dignity behind and got into the action. I spent most of my elementary schooling in an occupied country. Finally

our men could safely come out of hiding and enjoy the sunshine and fresh air. The singing and the dancing went on and on. We turned all our anger and penned-up feelings into a never to be forgotten glorious celebration. But our freedom came at a dear price. Many young Canadian soldiers never returned home to their families but found their graves in the Netherlands.

A few years ago, Derrick, my seven-year old grandson, a cub scout, laid a wreath at the epitaph for the fallen soldiers here in Saanich. In my mind's eye I recalled when I was seven and witnessed the beginning of that war and much later the ending. Tears filled my eyes as I thought of the sacrifices made for our freedom and felt we had come full circle when Derrick laid that wreath. Our family of 11 emigrated to BC in 1951 and have started our roots here when my youngest brother, Dick, was born here on Canadian soil.