INTRODUCTION:

This compilation of war anecdotes was first written in a series of e-mail messages to George R. Marshall in Fort Myers, Florida, USA. He asked me about my war experiences, when he noted that I had lived ear Arnhem, during the Second World War about which he had read the book "*A Bridge too Far*".

So I decided to comply with his request and sent him a series of short anecdotes about my experiences as a child during the war. Bit by bit they have been extended afterwards and what follows is my final story, in which most probably many anecdotes have been left out, because I do not remember them, something for someone over 80 is nothing strange, I should say.

Moreover, some other stories are at least partially based on hearsay, which I could extend by asking around amongst my brothers and sisters and cousins, but the present compilation gives a sufficiently extensive idea of what a child in the Second World War experienced.

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1.

I was born in the Netherlands so I also lived there during the war. On the 10th of May 1940 I was almost 8 years old, but I still remember the old German airplanes passing over our heads as they invaded our country. For that time those Messerschmidts and Stukas were of course very modern and to us, in our riverside village called Gendt, not far from the German border, they were in fact the first airplanes we ever saw. in a
bird's eye view, the German border was perhaps ten kilometers to the east, on the eastern side of the river Waal, while our village is on the western side.

As I recall, it was a beautiful day with clear blue skies. I even remember a farm hand passing by our house on his wooden shoes, which were still commonly used at the time, and saying"They almost flew my cap off my head!". And I remember that we didn't have to go to school that day. The world was still very small for us Children and perhaps also for that farmhand on his wooden shoes. In fact, I think our village was the world for us. It is a very old village where there was a Roman villa called Ganita at the time of the Roman emperor Claudius.

Nevertheless, of course, even we, as children did have some vague notion that something dangerous hung in the air. Our parents had talked about the war threat several times before, particularly in 1939 when, as I learnt in my history lessons many years later, the Germans attacked Poland. And of course there had been the false hopes that British prime minister Nevil Chamberlain brought back from a meeting with Hitler, waving proudly with an agreement on a sheet of paper that had less value than a piece of toilet paper. Our parents had vaguely heard about it and moreover, they had the expectation that Germany would respect Dutch neutrality like they had done in the First World War.

Sunday, September 17 1944 was also a beautiful day with blue skies and a very pleasant summer temperature. On that day, we admired the hundreds of allied paratroopers coming down near Nijmegen, which we could see as we stood and sat on the flat roof at the back of our house. and we were jubilant, because we thought we would be liberated soon. Nothing of the sort. That morning allied planes had bombed several places they apparently considered to be suspicious even in our village, where they destroyed an old brick factory which hadn't been in use any more for many years but was maintained as a monument. That bombardment, - the first one that took place in our village, also disturbed the high mass in the Roman Catholic church at the beginning of our street, because on hearing the explosions everyone jumped up and rushed out of the Church, my father and we included. That's why I remember it was a Sunday.

When I mention "Allied planes" I'm using a term we learnt later after our liberation in 1945. Because for the greater part of the war we always referred to "Tommies", meaning British military men, because we didn't know much of any other nations involved in combating the Germans. For us, it was England that withstood the German aggression

What we didn't know at that time was that the battle of Arnhem had failed. As a consequence our villages became front area, with daily shelling. After a number of weeks, the Germans - who knew more than we did of course, - decided to evacuate us. Some of my relatives were killed or wounded during that period before evacuation. We didn't want to go, because the Tommies were only a few kilometers away from us, but we didn't know that they were not going to come our way.

So eventually, after having been evacuated by the Germans, we lived in a barn on the compound of two brick factories, with 14 persons: grandfather, grandmother, 2 wounded cousins, father, mother and 8 children of which the youngest - my youngest brother - was just 2 years old. We had divided the barn into two parts, one to sleep in, - all of us together - and the other part to live in. That winter we suffered hunger. The last two weeks before we were liberated, we had to shelter in the ovens of the brick factories, because the Tommies, as we still called them, were shelling us from the other side of the river.

Don't forget that the first two and a half years of the war, it was only Great Britain that withstood the German forces, because the United States did not intervene until 1942, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. We later heard the famous words of Winston Churchill about the Royal Air force (RAF) : "*Never have so few, done so much, for so many*."

We were liberated on the 18th of April 1945, but couldn't go home yet, because the area was littered with land-mines.

That should do as a very brief introductory description, I suppose. I think I could write a complete book about our experiences, and some people say I should, but most people born after the war wouldn't be much interested, I'm afraid.

2.

History is indeed extremely educational, a fact that is not recognized by many youngsters, nor, if I may say so, by many populist politicians. The further removed from the actual events, the more they get blurred, especially for those who did not experience them. Like once on a program on Dutch TV about the Polish armored division that liberated part of the Netherlands. The female TV commentator said that the population of that part of the Netherlands had been very surprised, because they had expected only Canadians and Americans. In other words, she, born well after the war didn't realize that we, in the war, only thought of Englishmen. And by the way, at the battle of Arnhem there was also a Polish division involved, as we later learnt.

Arnhem is at 18 kilometers distance over the road, from my village of birth; that is about 12 miles. Nijmegen is, over the roads 11 kilometers; about 7 miles. On the day the allied paratroopers landed - September 17 1944 - The Germans tried to blow up the bridge over the river Waal (a wide tributary of the Rhine) in Nijmegen, but a courageous inhabitant managed to cut the control cable to the explosives. I don't remember very well his name. I believe it was Jan van Hoof or something like that.

That bridge had been blown up in 1940, by the Dutch, but it was rebuilt during the war years. I still remember the air pressure of that explosion, because we children were playing outside.

Before D-Day, June 1944 - the Allied invasion of Normandy (June 6) we never saw many Germans in our Villages. I suppose our village mayor got his instructions from some German authority, but as children we knew nothing about it. I even doubt that the grownup population in general had much of an idea of what was happening. The only thing I remember was seeing a man with a yellow David Star on his coat and some idiot calling out: "Hey, give that Jew a piece

of bacon!" As a matter of fact, now that I mention this event, it rather surprises me that so many Jews did comply with the ridiculous obligation to wear a yellow David star on their overcoats, so as to be recognizable from far off.

One thing I remember was that our classroom teacher (third grade) had been arrested by the Germans, though we had no idea why, and a very pretty young lady came to stand in for him. Curiously enough, even at my age of 8 years, I apparently found her so pretty that I still remember her standing there in front of us, telling some sort of a fairy tale. I must have been very sad, when our classroom teacher came back, with a beard he had grown during his detention, but he never told us why he had been detained.

Until D-day, - June 6, 1944 - generally speaking, life went on more or less as usual, particularly for us children. But, of course, we, living there, were unacquainted with what was happening, because radios were forbidden by the Germans and what phone lines that had existed - very few - had been cut. Shortly after the paratroopers landed at Nijmegen and at Arnhem - that bridge too far over the river Rhine, we also lost electric power. But we had no notion why. The only guy who still had a hidden radio, - our neighbor butcher - couldn't use it any more when the power went down. He was a jolly guy, who one day, when German soldiers came searching his house, grabbed the radio in a blanket and with it in his armpit he scolded the Germans in his home dialect - which of course they didn't understand, and walked past them with his radio, in accordance with his motto: "*If dogs bark, you got to bark back*!".

From the moment electricity was cut, we of course were in trouble in the evenings. The few candles we had were quickly gone and there was no oil of any sort any more to use

old-fashioned oil lamps. But a solution was quickly found, because every household in the Netherlands had (and has) at least one bicycle. Most of them two. We too. After all, the bicycle is the most intensively used commuter vehicle for short distances in the Netherlands. That is why the Dutch are often called the Chinese of Europe. My grandfather still rode a bike at the age of 92 and my mother still used the bike to go shopping until three months before her death at the age of 86.

So we mounted a bicycle on a box so that the hind wheel remained free above the floor and took turns peddling to produce some light with the bike's dynamo. And of course, we kids took pride in producing more light by pedaling faster than the one before.

Books like "A bridge too far", of course give an military story, but what I can tell is our own, non-military experiences. And even then, it's the memories of a child, in which there are no verifiable facts, except for the facts we learnt afterwards in our history lessons. Not only we, children,didn't really know what was happening, but our parents didn't either. The scarce information they got from the butcher who would listen to the Dutch transmissions of the BBC in London, called Radio Orange, were far from detailed. It was called Radio Orange, because the Dutch royal family descends from William of Orange (1533 - 1584), the leader during the 80-years' war against Spanish domination of the so-called "Low Lands" and orange is the Dutch national color.

Actually, part of the population of The Netherlands was not very content with the fact that the Royal family had fled to England when the Germans invaded the country. According to them, they should have stayed to experience the hardships of the people. However, after the war that attitude changed completely, when it became known that the Belgian king did not flee and became a puppet of the German regime. This, of course is also information we got after the war.

A nephew of mine, who owns a fairly big Rhine barge, and quite often loads or unloads in Germany once told me how a young German had tried to tease him by saying: "Your country was occupied by the German troops in three days time! What kind of soldiers were those Dutchmen?" "peaceful ones," said my nephew, "who couldn't understand that there were such beastly brutes who wanted to attack them." And he added: "And those brutes were such idiots as to accept that a failure of an Austrian paperhanger came to rule over them.". "I don't like you." said the German youth.

At the time I lost my sight altogether, in 1972, I shared a room in the Amsterdam hospital with a German - Bavarian - farmer who was sent to Amsterdam for an operation, after having had an accident on his farm. I still see him standing there in the hospital room, looking very distressed, as if thinking: 'What am I doing here in a place where nobody understands me.' I had read his name on his bed and concluded it must be Swiss, or Austrian or Bavarian German. So I asked him in German: "*Was für Nation sind She?*" ("What nationality are you?" and his face brightened up into a big smile as he said: "*Deutscher*" (German).
When he called home, that evening, he told his wife: "I am a Bavarian (Beier) and he calls himself Bavarian (Beijer). He told me he came from the neighborhood of Munich, but when we got better acquainted he said: "That's what they told me to say, but I really am from a village next to Dachau." And he added: "but I was only 12 years old at the time." And when we visited

him, on our round trip through Europe, in 2001, he was so upset by seeing me again, after so many years, that he couldn't even talk high German any more, only his Bavarian dialect, which did give me some trouble understanding him. But, when I told him, that we were also going to have a look at the "KZ-Lager", - the concentration camp, he again said: "*Ja, damals war ich 12 Jahre alt*" - At that time I was 12 years old.

We will never forget our visit to that concentration camp. It was a horrible experience. And then to think that it was not an extermination camp!

3.

I was born with extreme myopia, i.e. short-sightedness, which is due to eyes that are too long and as a consequence, stretched retinas that are weak and will easily detach. That happened in my left eye when I was about 10 years old in the beginning of 1943, probably due to a fall on ice, where we were sliding - so in the middle of the war - and at the time the operation technique still required that you lay still on one ear for about three weeks. Now you tell a 10-year old to do just that and you can be sure that it will fail. Moreover, a few times the nurses came rushing into the ward to pull my bed away from the windows, because there was a bombardment going on.

To get to the hospital was an adventure in itself. Our general practitioner told my father in the morning to come back after dark. Then there in a village in the war, in the consulting room of a village GP he diagnosed retinal detachment and started fumbling with one of those old-fashioned telephones, and somehow got through to that eye clinic in Utrecht who told him to get me there the next day.
How, they didn't tell him. the local garage owner did have a car, but no gasoline. He had built

what they called a "wood-gas generator" connected to the back of that old car. Strangely enough it did work and the thing did move. And it brought us to Elst, a little town south of Arnhem, where there was a railway station and there we got onto an old fashioned train, with an impressive big steam bellowing locomotive in front of it, - the first such machine I ever saw - which took us in a few hours - because it had to stop at almost every tree - to Utrecht, a distance of about a hundred kilometers, some 62 miles.

Those "wood-gas generators" were even used by the Germans at the time and I find it rather strange that they were not developed any further after the war. However, in these days of alternative energy promotion, almost seventy years later, the idea has come back in what is now known as "bio-gas generation", meaning that gas is generated by heating biological refuge. It seems that if you heat a barrel of wood chips from below, the wood won't burn but will produce gas which will burn if you lead it to the place where you want it to burn and That's what is being done nowadays as an alternative source of energy, using organic refuge. Even in our island of Aruba, a commercial enterprise called Ecotech has signed a contract with the local water and electricity plant to deliver bio-gas.

Anyway, I lost my sight in that eye while the other one was a so-called "lazy eye" - officially known as "amblyopia", so that I could see, but not read. That's why, after the war, I was sent to an institute for the blind, where I learned to read and write braille and was taught touch typing and all other normal school subjects, including English, German and French. Meantime, however, I started to be able to read normal print again, though I had to hold it at a very close distance. I said so to an ophthalmologist once, who maintained that you couldn't really improve sight in the case of amblyopia and he said: "*Mr. de Beijer, it's not your eye that has improved, but your brains have improved in interpreting the visual images."*

As for that village doctor, I have often told present day physicians how he, in those dire circumstances, became a medical jack-of-all-trades without demanding pay for his interventions. For instance, that cousin of mine I mentioned, during a bombardment by an allied warplane on my grandparents home, got a bomb splinter across his right-hand index and middle finger. So our local doctor amputated his fingers in the cellar of his house, with an instruction book on his lap.
During that same bombardment my female cousin (7 years old) got a bomb splinter into her back, which the doctor didn't dare remove,because it almost touched her lungs. They were both brought to our house, because their parents and elder sister died in that attack. Their mother, my aunt, was my MOTHER'S elder sister. My grandparents (on my mother's side) also came to join us all. They at least had miraculously escaped uninjured during the attack, although the bomb was dropped precisely at their house. The next day half the houses in that street - the village's main street - were destroyed but that day without any casualties, because people had taken shelter in time.

Why the allied planes dropped those bombs we never understood, but in those days I suppose the pilots had no other means to reconnoiter than their eyesight through their cockpit windshield and could easily misjudge a situation. That actually also happened in Nijmegen, on the 22nd of February 1944, when a squadron of American bombers had already passed the city on their way to the German town of Cleve (so they say),just across the border, when the squadron leader apparently decided he had made a mistake and had already passed the town of

Cleve he had to bomb and returned to Nijmegen and bombed it, while the safety signal had already sounded and everyone had left their shelters, so that there were many casualties and the center of the city was completely destroyed At the time, of course we didn't know that squadron was American. We learnt all that in our war history lessons.

A curious thing in the whole story is, however, that flying above Nijmegen, the pilots must have been able to see the city of Cleve, because it is just across the border and moreover, Cleve is not situated on a river, like Nijmegen. So some suggest that the squadron was on its way to Emmerich further north-east, which indeed is situated on the south bank of a river (the Rhine) same as Nijmegen on the south bank of the river Waal.

I lost my other eye just after my 40th birthday; I had undergone a cataract operation, which is normally a doodle a piece of cake, but in my case I got a nasty infection, so my eye became completely blurred and I had to lay quietly, because they feared retinal detachment. Well, that retinal detachment came in the end, when I already could see better than I ever had and it was complete. They operated it, saying: "You have nothing to loose anyway." Well, that was it. I lost that eye completely, because it developed an acute glaucoma so they had to remove it.

At the time I was working for a national newspaper in the editorial documentation department. I also wrote a lot for that newspaper and other magazines. In an extensive discussion with a labour expert, he said: "*Look Mr. de Beijer. A forty year old who looses his job has a small chance to get a new one on his own level of expertise. A blind person aged 40 has about 5 percent of a chance of getting a job on his level of knowledge and experience*." So,my Aruban born wife and me decided to move to Aruba maintaining my disability allowance and get involved in the development of services for the visually handicapped on

the island, while my wife almost immediately got back into elementary school teaching.

4.

In the meantime (2012) we celebrated my 80th birthday where I told everyone that I expected them all back in 20 years' time, which, according to my wife's belief, is tempting fate. However, I believe in "amor fati" - the love of one's fate - because after I lost my sight completely I started the most and satisfying part of my life, traveling the Caribbean and North and Central America and meeting lots of new and intriguing friends and acquaintances.

As I said, after the allied troops landed near Nijmegen and Arnhem on September 17 1944 during what was called "operation Market Garden" - as we learnt afterwards - our village became front-line, where the Germans and the allied forces started shelling each other almost continually. We learnt to recognize, even as small children, when a shell would fall near-by, or further away. It depended on the whistling sound they made as they approached. We had dug a shelter in our garden for two families and even German soldiers helped us with their advice, but those, of course, were not the Waffe SS soldiers, but 'Wehrmacht soldiers, that is: conscripted ones. One Dutch SS soldier once came walking into our yard and asked my mother to lend him her bike. He would bring it back in the afternoon, so he said. Until today! Another, conscripted German soldier one day came up to our house and asked if he could please wash himself, because he hadn't had a decent wash for two weeks. He said he didn't understand the war; "*Ich musz She totschieszen und She müszen mir totschieszen und was haben wir zusammen*?"- "I have to kill you and you have to kill me and what have we together." he said. He was not a young man, as I remember him, thanking my mother for her kindness when he went back to his post.

By the end of 1943 and in the early part of 1944, every now and then columns of German soldiers would march past singing "*Und wir fahren, und wir fahren, und wir fahren ab nach Engeland, Engeland*!" - and we will sail off to England" and we children, would then yell "Plons! Plons!"- "splash! splash!". And then we would sing: "*Wir versaufen, wir versaufen, wir vewrsaufen vlak voor Engeland, Engeland*!"- "we will drown, right before England", half in German, half in Dutch.

We had to learn German songs at school and watch German propaganda films, which really didn't mean a thing to us. On the contrary. We would loudly sing protest songs, particularly directed against Dutch collaborators. Like the one which I'll try to translate. By the way, The Dutch NAZI party was called "NSB". The song went more or less as follows:

"*At the corner of the street,*
stands a Pharisee.
it's not a man, it's not a woman,
it's an NSB!
At the corner of the street,
That's where he is vending;
He is selling his fatherland
for five rotten pennies!"
The NAZI Dutch newspaper was called "Volk en Vaderland"- People and fatherland.

One of our opposite neighbors was a member of the NSB party. As far as I know the only one in the village. He even had volunteered for the German armed forces and had fought at the East front in Russia. One day, I remember, he came to our home to complain to my father that we had bullied his son with abusive words, saying that he was the son of a traitor. So my father risked a lot answering: "And what do you say he is then?" That was a very dangerous thing to say, of course, but luckily he got away with it. There were probably more collaborators in the village, but we didn't know them until after the war was over.

Every now and then, other memories from the war years pop up again. One I remember was in a way quite funny. The Germans had erected a search-light installation not far from our home on the dike, with which they tried to capture allied planes in the night to be able to shoot at them. One night, they caught one, but the pilot dove down straight into the light beam with its machine guns bellowing. So we could hear the German commander there bawling: "*Licht aus! Licht aus*"
- "light out!".
Another, not at all funny thing was that after the allied troops had landed near Nijmegen, the Germans apparently also believed they would soon occupy our villages as well. Therefore they decided to blow up our church tower, at the beginning of our street, which was about 30 meters high, say a hundred feet, to prevent them from using it as a watchtower. So they blew it up and let it drop straight into the church, because there was no room sideways.
It was, of course, a ridiculous act, because even if the allied troops had conquered our villages, what would they have wanted a watchtower for?

We, as children, of course had no notion of what was going on with the Jews and I doubt that most adults had much of a notion of it. Though I remember one family which had two strange little girls in their midst, so I suppose they were Jewish children in hiding. In fact, as we learnt later, many Jewish children had been saved from the "gas chambers" by hiding them with non-Jewish families, who let them pass as their own children. They often were even converted to Catholicism or reformed church Christians

I don't know if you have ever heard of the famous German saying after the war: "*Wir haben es nicht gewusst*." - "we didn't know.". And for the majority of them that was probably true, although it must be recognized that Hitler came to power in a more or less democratic way and that opposition to him and his NAZI party was rather limited.
And one more thing, on the buckles of the German soldiers' belt it said: "*Gott mit uns*" - God with us".

After a few weeks after the landing of the allied paratroopers, the Germans, who knew of €course more than we did, decided to evacuate us and came in the middle of the night to rouse us out of our houses and shelters, telling us we had to go across the Rhine. Some people did just that, but others, like ourselves, didn't want to leave, hoping that the allied forces would soon liberate us. So we did leave our houses and shelters and went in the middle of the night to a brick factory, near the river Waal where we passed the rest of the night in one of the empty ovens, praying! together with lots of other
people. As a Dutch saying goes: "emergency makes one pray".

As I already told , by then, we had our grandparents - on my mother's side with us and our two wounded cousins. As far as I can remember, only my father and grand-father attended the burial of my uncle and aunt and their elder daughter, without any religious service. I remember hearing the story of a father in our village, burying his two little daughters himself in his home garden.

The next morning we went to my father's river barge, which lay not too far away from the brick factory, because he and his brother - on another barge next to my father's - wanted to try and float in the night towards Nijmegen. However, that failed due to too much moonlight and so the next day the Germans again chased us away from there, saying that it was far too dangerous, which of course it was. After all, the space we had to stay in was extremely small and a shell on the roof would have killed us all. The Germans ordered us again to go and cross the river Rhine. Again we didn't but took a fairly long walk to go and shelter in the hold of another barge of another uncle of mine (the family were Rhine skippers - as they called them - from the early part of the 19th century already). Incredibly as it may seem, the weather was perfect, for this kind of walking, over sandy roads along the river while on our way and, as I clearly remember even my grandmother had to squat down with the aid of my grandfather to relieve herself there and then in the middle of the road.

Another curious thing I remember of that day was a fellow on a horse-drawn cart loaded with all kinds of household things and him singing at the top of his voice. My father and grandfather apparently knew him, because they laughed at him and asked him jokingly where he thought he was going. "Across the Rhine!"he said. "Like the hun* ordered!" My parents conclusion was that he had stolen all the things including horse and cart.

*I use the word "hun"here as the only suitable translation for the Dutch abusive term "moffen"for Germans. "Hun" was used in Great Britain as an abusive term for Germans during the first World War.

In the early evenings, some brave men, like my father, would go into the fields to see if there were cows they could milk. One evening he came back telling us he had met a couple of German soldiers who had deserted and were in hiding, waiting for the allied forces to come and liberate the area. I'm afraid they did have to wait for a long time still.

One of my father's cousins who was an excellent swimmer, one evening got out of his clothes, rubbed himself with grease and dove into the river. After we were liberated and had returned home, we learnt that he had indeed reached the allied area.

A day or two later, the Germans decided to take more drastic measures to get us away from there and rounded us all up into a long column with two soldiers at the beginning, a few soldiers at the sides, - to prevent us from taking a side-road off the dike and two at the end. Before that, they allowed us to take what little possessions we still had, on bicycles and wheel-barrows and I remember my father being too slow in the eyes of an SS officer, threatening him to shoot him "*durch die Knochen*" - through the bones- upon which my mother got very angry and since she was fluent in German (she was born in Germany from Dutch parents and went to school there for 8 years) started to scold the man, who apparently got the impression that she was German and lowered his gun immediately.

The next day, as we heard later, the Germans discovered that a small group had remained behind on the same barge that we had been on, and an SS officer threatened to throw a

hand-grenade into the hold where they were hiding. So a young cousin of my father's came out to shove a gangplank ashore. After he had just done that, the SS officer shot him through the head.

I'm not quite sure any more, but I think we walked for about ten kilometers(about six miles) along the dike- which had a good asphalt-paved road, like most dikes in the Netherlands - to where the Germans had a military ferry on the Rhine, with which they took us across, to a little town called Pannerden, where we were left to our fate in the middle of the night. However, as a Dutch saying goes: "when distress is at its highest, rescue is nearest" A young man came walking along and asked: "Where are you all going to at this beastly hour?" and he took us to his farm house, where my grand-parents and the two wounded cousins got a bed to sleep in. The rest of us had to sleep on the floor, of course, but we also got bread and butter and milk and eggs!

5.

After we had woken up at that friendly farmer's house, he gathered more bread and eggs and milk for us to have breakfast and next we started off on a long walk, which my father had decided upon, to a brick factory at the river Ijssel,- another narrow tributary of the river Rhine, - where he knew the owner, because he had supplied him a few times with a shipload of sand. It was about a 30 kilometers' walk (about 18.5 miles) but we were in luck, because in spite of the fact that it was, if I'm not mistaken, the end of September or the early part of October, the weather again was very good, and sunny; I clearly remember that. And, mind you , we were quite a sight, with an elderly couple - my grand-parents, 80 years old - my father and mother, 44 years old, my mother carrying my 2-year old little brother; my hand-bandaged cousin of 17 who lost two fingers and was constantly in pain, my female cousin, about 7 with a bomb splinter in her back, also causing constant pain, and my brothers and sisters, the oldest being 13 years old. In all, including my then 2-year old brother we were four boys and three little girls. And then, my father with his wheelbarrow with what little belongings he had been able to gather.

At a cross-roads, we met my grandfather on my father's side, and an uncle, who said they were going to Zevenaar, a small town east of there, where my grand-mother (my father's mother) had been taken a few weeks earlier to a hospital. (By the way, she also had been blind for quite some time.). So my father decided to accompany them, and we waited for him to come back. He did so about an hour later, with tears in his eyes, telling us his mother had died and had already been buried.

So, we walked and walked and got thirsty and hungry and somewhere in the afternoon we passed a German post and my father decided to go and see if they would give us something to eat and drink. And ... what do you know, they did! At least, I remember my father coming back with his arms full of bread and sausages.

In late afternoon we reached the river Ijssel and a friendly man with a rowing boat took us across in small groups. At the brick factory site they had no place for us to stay at that moment, so they let us into one of the ovens of the factory that was not in use, covered the floor with a lot of straw and some friendly souls brought us red cabbage stew in mashed potatoes and I can tell you it tasted so superbly that I still remember it, although I'm not very fond of red cabbage.

The local village idiot also came around to laugh at us but we were all very tired and quickly fell asleep in the straw.

The next morning, they cleared out a little barn for us to stay in, but it was far too small and by noon, two young gentlemen, sons of the owners of another factory site nearby came by and told us they had a larger place for us to stay in, so we went with them and indeed got a fairly large barn, divided into two parts, one to serve us as bedroom - for all 14 of us together! - and the front half as a sitting and living room with some old furniture and a very old-fashioned little stove to keep the place warm and to cook on. Luckily, the factories lay idle, but there was lots of brown coal (or lignite, as they also call it) and we were allowed to use it.

Our parents and grandparents with the aid of some benevolent souls of the local population around the factory site, rounded up a lot of little low benches, like long foot warmers, with which they covered the floor of the bedroom part of our barn, and next these were covered with straw again covered with a tarpaulin of some sorts. I don't remember where they got all that plus some big blankets and pillows, but we really had a place to sleep in a fairly comfortable way all together!

Of course there was no bathroom in that barn and actually I don't remember whether the outside improvised toilet was there from our arrival or was constructed. I think the latter, because it was a very simple thing mounted on top of a cesspit. Of course, in the winter that soon followed it was not a pleasure to use it. Therefore, I think we children were allowed to use an improvised chamber-pot inside our "home". For water, there was a simple hand pump

in the ground where we could fill a bucket and take it home to wash and cook.

We lived there for 8 months, survived the winter famine and couldn't go home after our liberation, because the place was littered with land-mines.

6.

Talking about the war, I often ask myself whether people dedicating themselves to war-children really have any knowledge of how children react to such experiences. I was and am not traumatized by my war experiences. Children accept the weirdest events as normal. I remember I was playing outside on that brick factory compound, when an allied war-plane dove down and started shooting with its machine guns. Don't ask me why, but one of the bullets hit a rail of the factory freight railway, quite near me, so I walked towards it to pick up that bullet. I dropped it immediately again, because it was very hot.

On another occasion, my father had borrowed a bike to take me to the ophthalmologist in a suburb of Arnhem and while we were on our way, a truckful of German soldiers passed us and an allied plane came diving down with its machine guns fully open so that the bullets literally flew around us and my father through back his leg to jump off the bike, almost throwing me off. Anyway, we dived into a ditch at the side of the road and when the truck and plane had passed, we got back onto the bike to get to our destination. On the way back, we got a flat tire and went to a bicycle repair shop which we passed. But the man only wanted to repair our tire if we brought him a kilo of potatoes."I wish I had them, for my own family." said my father, so that the man was kind enough to repair our tire after all.

During that time, my mother and my elder brother went out across the river Ijssel (which isn't very wide) to go begging for food with the local farmers. There was always someone with a rowing boat to get them across and later on back. Quite often she came back with little or nothing. But, once I remember, she walked onto a farm, where a group of German soldiers had just slaughtered a pig. My mother asked in her perfect German if she could get some meat, whereupon one of the Germans grabbed his bayonet and cut off a big piece of meat from the pig and handed it to her.

There were also days that some friendly farmer gave her bottles of milk and potatoes and the like so we had something decent to eat again. One curious thing I remember was taking turns at having to shake a bottle of milk for a long time, until we got a little piece of butter in it for my mother to use it in her cooking. Afterwards, we kids had to drink the buttermilk, which I personally didn't like at all for the taste of it.

That winter, my father became a thief for the first and only time in his life. He went to a farm with a big fieldful of cabbages and asked to buy some. But the farmer refused,saying that money had no value. So that night, after dark, my father went back to cut off a number of cabbages. At that moment another man came walking onto the field and asked my father to sell him some of the cabbages. "You can cut off as many as you want." said my father, upon which the man gave him a cigar. Don't ask me where he got it from, because my grandfather who was addicted to his pipe, couldn't get any tobacco and therefore put dried oak-leaves in his pipe, thereby spreading an awful stench. So my father, who did like cigars, gave the one he got to my

grandfather who crumbled it into his pipe.

A week later the whole cabbage field was under water, because the river had risen to such an extent that it flooded the lower lying areas, - something happening quite often in winter - and we became island dwellers.

People called us "refugees", but we didn't want to be called refugees, because we didn't flee, but were chased away, as we saw it. The Germans had called it "evacuation", but as I said before, we didn't want to be evacuated. I can understand very well why people in danger areas often refuse to go away, while everyone "sensible" says they have to flee.

One day, I remember - or at least, remember my parents telling the story, there was a razzia, in which the Germans rounded up able bodied men to do a sort of forced labour for them. On that occasion, my father had hidden in a haystack. After an hour or so, he thought he might be safe and came out of the haystack, walking straight into the arms of a German military man. The man asked him for his papers, which he didn't have with him, so he explained where he lived, (in his best German, which wasn't all to good) and at last the soldier exclaimed:
"*Ah! bei die Deutsche Frau!"* - with the German woman. "*meine Frau*" - My wife - said my father. and he could go where he wanted. That German, indeed had been in our barn dwelling to check and had stayed for quite a bit of time to talk to my mother, thinking she was German. Don't forget that these soldiers had almost no contact with German girls and women, because inn those days girls and women were not yet integrated in the armed forces.

There was also a doctor there who had been evacuated, but he had nothing to help people with. When a mother came to him with her daughter, and he diagnosed her problem as

anemia, he told the mother to get potatoes, wash them, peel them and let her daughter eat the raw potato peels. (at that time there were still potatoes to be gotten. My (then) little sister broke her wrist and the doctor used little sticks to set it right.

That Christmas was one we won't forget very easily. The first Christmas without a church, without a priest, without Christmas trees, without anything to make the days a little festive. On the contrary. We were in the middle of the 1944 famine winter in the Netherlands, mostly in the western parts of the country, around the major big cities like Amsterdam, but many Dutchmen never knew that we, in the east, also suffered hunger. One curious event I remember was on the 6th of December - Saint Nicholas day (or Santa Claus if you will) - I was outside near the water stream that had covered most of the area, when a horse-drawn trap came rushing towards me with Saint Nicholas at the reins and "zwarte Piet"(black Peter, the perennial assistant of Saint Nicholas) at his side, who threw a bag with a sandwich towards me. Of course I picked it up and ran home with it, where my mother, who by that time also had become very thin - gave most of it to my 17 year old cousin, who began to yawn when he saw it. My mother suspected that it must have been the two sons of the factory owners.

The daughter of that family, Elfie, took a special liking to me, probably because of my visual handicap. She took me home a few times to help me make a cardboard Christmas crib, to put in our house(barn). When we finally went home after our liberation she gave me a painting she had made called "The Ruin of Pompei".

Nevertheless, a small group of people had equipped a small barn to serve as a church, and without a priest, we still prayed and sang our Christmas songs, beseeching all saints in heaven to speed up our liberation. Two young ladies took it upon them to teach us children the Catholic catechism and since I couldn't read,my elder brother had to read the answers to me for me to learn them by heart. And so I did! And the young ladies praised me for being so good at answering their questions. God forbid that they should turn up nowadays, to put them to me, because I wouldn't get further than the first two.

By the beginning of 1945, Tante Kaat (Aunt Kate) - so we called an elderly lady moving around in an old-fashioned wheelchair - who was a clairvoyant, so she asserted, predicted that we would be liberated on the 18th of April. Before that, so she said, we would see a lot of strange faces. She said that On the morning of the 18th of April we would hear nothing but people praying. And later in the day, she said there would appear angels blowing horns. In the end the Angels didn't show up! Perhaps she considered the allied soldiers to be angels, but in any case, they didn't blow on horns. The "*strange faces*" did indeed pass during a week or so, consisting of mongolian forced laborers who were ferried across the river to march on to somewhere else.

She told us, that as a child in school, she had said to another girl once: "to-morrow you will die" and the kid got an accident the next day and died. So, her father had been very angry with her, given her a good spanking, and told her never to say such things again,even if she knew they were true.

By February, or there abouts, the water had receded,so we could get to other places again using the road, and that meant our worst hunger period had also passed, though what we could get to eat was neither much nor much good.

It was about the beginning of April that the Tommies (so we thought) reached the other side of the river and started shelling our side with mortar grenades. So once again we had to take shelter in the ovens of the brick factories, which had walls of more than three feet thick. One evening, when the shelling had stopped, German soldiers came to warn us that we had better leave to the next village for the night, because their commander had decided to blow up the very high factory chimneys. But less than half an hour later, when we had just prepared to go, two of them came back to tell us - that is: my mother of whom they thought she was German - that we could stay, because the commander had decided not to execute his original plan. So my father and grandfather went around to warn everyone to stay put.

And as I said, Tante Kaat had said that on the morning of the 18th, you would only hear people praying. That was more or less exactly what happened. On the evening of the 17th, the Germans told us to pack our things and leave the place, but some guys came round to tell everybody to stay put, because the Germans were clearing out their things. And so, the next morning, in those factory ovens, full of flees, lice and what have you, you only heard people praying. Most of them Roman Catholics, so they prayed their rosaries aloud. By 9 o'clock some brave men went out and came back to tell us the Germans were gone and they rowed across the river to tell the Tommies as well. I don't know whether they were English, American or Canadian, but our brave men were just in time to prevent them from starting to shell us again.

Luckily, the Germans had not removed the warning fences around their mine fields. So, after a week or so, a number of brave men produced long sticks with long nails at the end, and went into the mine fields to get the things removed. They were very simple mines, made of

wooden boxes, with a hole in the front into which they stuck the detonator into a block of explosives. The lid had a groove in it to fit over the detonators winged pin. When they closed the lids it rested on the little wings. If you stepped on them the winged pin released the detonator and it exploded.

Before the volunteer mine detectors had started their job, however, one stupid farmer wanted to go and see how his fields had survived the winter inundations. He didn't even get further than ten meters, when he lay screaming his head off and after a while a few guys threw a rope to him and pulled him back, where the doctor, who had also arrived in the meantime, established that his right leg was lost.

7.

I finished my previous story with our rather prosaic liberation. That didn't mean though that we could go home. It took a few weeks at least, before my father was allowed to go and have a look. That, of course, also took a few days, because he had no other means of traveling any more except his two legs. When he came back, he told us the house was badly damaged and we were not yet allowed to go, because the provisional authorities were trying to clear the mine fields first. And, evidently, they were not the simple mines that we knew in our evacuation region.

In the meantime, the Germans still used some of their crazy weaponry, like the V2us, the forerunner of the modern cruise rockets. They only couldn't direct them, so when we heard one coming, we waited anxiously to listen when the engines would stop. At that moment they would come down. One came down a few miles from where we were living producing a big hole in a farm field. The V1us - the forerunners of the modern ballistic missiles, did reach England, but since they had little or no means of directing them to a specific spot, most of them didn't do much harm. And as you probably know, the Americans marched onto Peenemünde - where these rockets were built and launched - as fast as possible, to get Wernherr von Braun and his men and fly them straight to the States, to go on developing their toys. Because Wernherr von Braun's real goal was to develop space flight.

In the meantime, the doctor on our evacuation site told my cousin - who was constantly in pain due to his finger amputation, to consult one of the allied medical personal. If I remember well, of what I heard afterwards, it was an
American military physician who helped him and freed him of his pain. He then went to the first contingent of Dutch military men who came to the region to apply for a job. "No problem!" said the commander. "If you have to shoot you'll do it with your left arm.' In fact, he became a military trucker and went to what was then still called "Netherlands
East Indies", nowadays known as Indonesia.

Anyway, a month or so after our liberation, my father got a farmer across the river to lend us a FARM HAND WITH A horse and carriage, (not a fancy thing, but a simple farmer's cart) which we loaded with what little possessions we had accumulated during our evacuation, which, for that matter, took a few rowboat rides across the river Ijssel, and so we went home, sitting on top of the carriage, singing with joy. The ferry across the Rhine was already operational, so, after a

long day's ride we arrived home ...

The house was badly damaged. It had two big shell holes in the roof which my father had managed to close with two pieces of tarpaulin. All the windows were blown out and the inner doors had been used by the military occupants to make a latrine in the back yard because the cesspit was full. We supposed they had been allied troops, because in the cellar there was a big bed and a rifle with ammunition which were definitely not German.

Before we were evacuated, my grandfather had thrown a bag of gold coins in the barn at the back of the house. First thing he did when we arrived, was to go and have a look and came triumphantly back with his bag full of gold coins!

My father's barge had been sunk; I suppose it had been the Germans who had blown a hole in the hold; so he couldn't use it for the time being, though there was a great lack of means of transportation; but that had to wait till it could be lifted and repaired. From other parts of the country came trucks full of aid goods, (also with a lot of rubbish, I must say) so that after a few weeks we no longer had to sleep on the floor and sit on the floor to eat and drink. Of course, this isn't meant to be critical of people offering help to others in need, but it is true that amongst all the useful articles that arrived from other parts of the Netherlands, there was a lot of rubbish and a lot of things nobody needed like kitsch paintings. So much, that in the end the local authorities organized a raffle for all the things that remained, so that everyone, children included, won a price, me included, for the first and only time in my life. I remember winning a weird painting painted on velvet of a cloud with a light edge and a legend saying in Dutch of course: "Every cloud has a silver lining". I don't know where it's gone. Elfie Jurgens' painting is still in the family.

The whole village was very badly damaged, due to the fact that it probably remained frontline for many months. It had to be rebuilt and many houses were so badly damaged

that they had to be demolished. Actually, the provisional authorities also wanted to demolish our house, but my father insisted on repairing it. It is still there and one of my brothers lives in it, after he bought it from my mother.

As a matter of fact, it's really a miracle that no serious disasters happened in that period after our return home, because the place was indeed littered with land mines and other military fall-out. Like, one day, we, children found a whole lot of mortar grenades, and with our childs' logic, we decided they were dangerous, so we had better get rid of them by throwing them into a deep pond not far behind our house. There they probably still lie, though that pond has been filled up. It wasn't really a pond, but a large dredged hole where the brick factories dredged out clay for the production of their bricks.

We used it at the time to swim in and to canoe in half a wing-tip tank of the allied war planes, which they dropped when they were empty. Someone had sawed it lengthwise and we had hung a piece of lead underneath it to keep it stable. I was one of the few people who could canoe in it without capsizing. Nobody taught us to swim. We taught ourselves sometimes with our mothers looking on in horror. Most of the time, however, they didn't have the time to come and look.

A year or so later, a farmer lost both his legs, when he moved a ladder in his orchard and set it right onto a landmine, and a young man who went to visit his fiancee in his car, was blown right across the fence of the house , but while his car was a complete wreck, he remained unharmed.

My best friend - who rest in peace - was 14 years old when he and some other children found a heap of land mines. They told the owner of the place who called in the mine clearance service. Stupid as it may be, they asked my friend to show them where the mines lay and started to try and dismantle them, when the whole lot exploded. My friend was the only survivor! He had lost his sight and his eardrums were torn and was in hospital for a long time. Nevertheless, I have never known a jollier guy than he was. In the end, at age 68, he died of cancer due to asbestos infection, though he never worked with asbestos, but until the 80us, as you surely know, asbestos was being used everywhere, and nobody knew it was dangerous.

Even up to our present time, almost 70 years later, allied and German bombs are still found here and there - also in Belgium and Germany.

The health authorities sprayed the whole village with DDT - another one of those nowadays forbidden substances that at the time were the only means available to get rid of lice, flees, cockroaches, and other vermin. Moreover in many meadows dead animals were found that had to be cleared out and of course rats and mice had been very productive during the long absence of the human population.

As a consequence, at the time many - mostly children - died of all kinds of weird diseases like two of my cousins, younger than I, who died on the same day of diphtheria, next door to us. Many others suffered of typhoid and paratyphoid. (By the way, I caught typhoid in 1955 after my first visit to Spain!)

Another remark I want to make is that all the war horrors did not cause any aversion in us of

weapons and the like. On the contrary! We kids made imitation pistols and guns and directing them at each other we would call out: "Bang! ... Bang! You're dead!"

Of course, I have forgotten a lot of events, that also may have been very interesting, but I don't want to go around questioning others, to be able to write a complete book, though some people tell me I should write a book about my war-child experience. I don't know. So many stories have been written already, that I think the market is overloaded by now.

Nevertheless, I hope my stories were interesting to you.

8.

On the 50th anniversary of operation Market Garden, the commemoration transmissions on radio and TV really upset me all day, so much so, that my wife asked what was wrong with me. I said: "Nothing, really; it's all the memories coming back." And I know, it was not just me, who had that feeling. My cousin, who was wounded with a splinter in her back and her elder sister, also were quite upset that day.
Every year on September 17 it is commemorated that the allied paratroopers came down near Nijmegen and Arnhem. We saw the droppings near Nijmegen, but couldn't see it near Arnhem, of course. Too far away. But it was on the same date.
They called it Operation Market Garden and one of the commemoration events is always a large group of parachute jumpers who jumped off again near Arnhem, believe it or not, from Dakotas. Usually there were always some veterans amongst them,but by now they have all either died or become to old to risk a jump like that.

9.

Same as with the sporadic finding of unexploded bombs, every now and then the remains of a British soldier in Arnhem are reburied. After several years of investigation, they sometimes manage to determine his identity. At such an occasion several of his relatives are present and in the case of the last one I heard of one veteran of 87 hears who had known him had also made the journey to be present.
Curious, isn't it, how we are reminded of that period over and over again. Thank God the European Union was founded, so that kind of war can never be repeated in Europe. That's what inspired the founders. Therefore I detest all the Euro-skepticism in several European countries, particularly in Great Britain. And it was precisely Great Britain that lost perhaps most of their young men in the First and
Second World War.