

# A Hidden Child

By Anneke Bloomfield

My name is Anneke Bloomfield. I was born on April 19, 1935, in the Hague, the Netherlands. I share my family's experience in honor of my father, to whose choices I owe my life.

Germany invaded the Netherlands during the Second World War on May 10th, 1940. I was only five years old. Therefore, my story is from the perspective of a young child, unaware of the larger things happening around me, but painfully aware of the changes in my own life.

My family consisted of my mother Lien, my father Thomas, my three brothers (Klassje, Bertje, and Tom), and my sister (Henny) who was born during the course of the war. We lived near my grandparents and other extended family members who were an important part of my early childhood. Our home was in the Jewish quarter of the Hague, in what was at the time, the second largest Jewish community in the Netherlands.

My mother's parents were wealthy, and they often spoiled their grandchildren. I remember having a room filled with all the toys I could ever want—dolls, books, baby carriages. My grandma would always have me wear the prettiest dresses and shoes.

On the contrary, my father's parents were extremely poor. They couldn't shower us with gifts, but they showered me with love. They really were adorable, and so sweet. I call them my "huggy" grandparents because I went to get a hug from them as often as I could. They lived in an old neighborhood in a very, very old house in the city of Delft.

My mother, who was a former school teacher, stayed home to watch my siblings and me. My father had a good job with Royal Dutch Shell, an oil and gas company. Oil was an important part of Hitler's rearmament plan to build up Germany's military strength that had been limited as part of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the First World War. I don't know exactly what my father heard through the grapevine at work, but whatever he heard about German imports of large amounts of crude oil, made him very nervous. I was too young at the time to be aware of the anxieties felt by the adults around me, instead I was simply content and happy, with my loving family. I had everything I could want or need.

In 1938, my life began to change in drastic ways. My father moved our family out of the Jewish quarter, and into a townhouse in a Christian area. We were no longer allowed to visit our grandparents or other family in our old neighborhood. I was only three years old at the time, so you can imagine how upsetting and confusing it all was for me. As a toddler, I couldn't understand the fears my father had, but as an adult I can look back and see that his choice to move out of the Jewish quarter may have saved our lives.

My father feared antisemitic, that is anti-Jewish, violence and persecution, and so he set out to make his family appear Christian. We stopped attending synagogue on Friday evenings or Saturdays for Shabbat services. Instead, we attended the Sunday services at a local church in our new neighborhood. This church had a community library and my father began volunteering there two nights a week. The entire neighborhood could check out books from that library, so he met lots of our new neighbors, and more importantly they met him and began to associate him with the church.

The next thing he did was to enroll my siblings and me in a Christian Bible School. This school was not the closest school to our new house, but my father had chosen this school strategically to further our blending into the local Christian community. It was a small school, with only 250 students. We would not get lost in the crowd there, and that was important. I remember having to attend Bible classes first thing every morning. Needless to say, it was quite a big change in my life as a little Jewish girl.

Then on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and the Second World War began. I was so young, only four years old, and could not have understood what was happening, or the significance of the day. Instead, a day that stands out for me from the early years of the war was in April of 1940. It was my fifth birthday, and I had now been living away from the Jewish quarter for almost two years, unable to see my grandparents or extended family. Somehow, despite this separation, my mother's parents, the rich grandparents, were able to send me a present. It was a beautiful blue scooter with air filled tires which made me feel like I was floating over the cobblestones. I was happy.

Hitler sought world domination under the premise of *Lebensraum* — German for living space—, which was the belief that Aryans were superior to other people and deserved to expand and settle land, taking it from people and communities they saw as inferior. They wanted access to natural resources as well as revenge for Germany's loss in the First World War. Between September of 1939 and the spring of 1940, Germany defeated and occupied Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. Within days of my fifth birthday, on May 10th, 1940, Germany invaded the Netherlands. While I had felt my life had already changed drastically, it was about to be turned upside down.

When I close my eyes, I can picture the Nazi soldiers running through the street and shooting their guns. I remember lots of fighting between the Dutch and German armies and my father making our family sit huddled underneath the dining room table, trying to keep us calm and safe. The Dutch Army surrendered to the Nazis on May 15, 1940. In only five days, the Germans had taken over. Things happened so quickly that even if we had somewhere to go, there was no time to leave.

Despite this early chaos, my day-to-day life as a child didn't change too much. I went to school, played with my toys, and was with my family at home. What I didn't know then was that shortly after the Nazis occupied the Netherlands, a series of anti-Jewish laws were passed. Jews lost their jobs, were kicked out of school, and banned from restaurants and hotels. By January of 1941, all Dutch Jews were forced to register with the Nazi government of the Netherlands. But my family was hiding in plain sight, my father's choice to move out of the Jewish Quarter was proving to be very wise.

After almost two years of occupation, food and other goods became harder to get. You could no longer go to the store and get what you needed. Instead, every family was given ration coupons to exchange for goods like clothing, shoes, meat, flour, cheese, or bread. As a child, I was largely unaware of the particulars of the war going on around me, but I certainly noticed the pinch of my toes in shoes that were too small, the smaller portions of food on my own plate, and the hunger in my belly.

One day, a new neighbor moved into the house two doors down from my family. He was a member of the *National-Socialistische Beweging*, which is abbreviated as NSB. The NSB was a group comprised of Dutch fascists who were sympathetic to the Nazi party in Germany. Before Nazi occupation, they were just a small political movement with little power. However, after May of 1940, they were the only legally recognized political party in the Netherlands. The NSB worked in collaboration with the Nazis. They intimidated Jewish business owners and attacked Jews in the streets. They were very dangerous, especially to me and my family. Members of the NSB were fanatic in their beliefs. They hated Jews and would turn on anyone they believed to be working against the Nazis. They also had access to government records such as people's files and other legal documents. Essentially, they could find out a lot about someone.

My father was very concerned about someone like this living so close to our family. We nicknamed him "the Gestapo Guy." One day I came home, and I asked my mother, "Where's Klaasje (my older brother)?" She said, "Oh we found him a place to stay with some other people, quite a ways away from here where he has a little more sunshine; they have a little meat available and they are going to take care of him."

I was too young to put the pieces together but looking back now, our new NSB neighbor and my brother being sent away were two related events. My father's fear of his family being found out by this member of the NSB was great enough for him to send away his oldest son to hide with another family.

Then, I came home one day and Bertje, one of my little brothers, was also gone. He was only three years old. Hiding Jewish children was dangerous, but my father found a family willing to take him in. This family, who lived in a little village in the east of The Netherlands was also hiding another little Jewish boy of a similar age to Bertje. Little did my mom know then, but she would not be able to see her son for many years. After the war ended, the family who had taken in Bertje did not want to return him. They saw Bertje as their own son now. It took two and half years after the war ended to get my brother back. That was a heartbreaking experience for my family.

And then after my two brothers left, I too was sent away into hiding.

I was sent south, close to the border of Belgium, to a more rural area. I don't remember too much about it, but I do remember that the big fruit trees were new and exciting to me. I did a lot of tree climbing and I ate a lot of plums. As I mentioned earlier, it was very dangerous for people to hide Jewish children like us. If we were caught, the families hiding us would be punished, possibly killed. The people hiding me were scared of being caught, so they sent me back home. Klaasje was also sent home from wherever he had been sent.

Now that Klaasje and I were back home, my father changed gears. He began exercises with us to practice skills he thought would be important. One of these skills was independence: In the fall of 1943, my father put Klaasje (Klow-sha) and I on a tram. He told us to take the tram around, get off, transfer, get on a different tram, and eventually find our way home. My father wanted to make us feel confident in our ability to travel alone, and importantly to get ourselves back home no matter where we ended up. Klaasje and I ended up at the Kurhaus Hotel in the city of Scheveningen on the coast. I was eight years old and remembered that we had been to this city before with our parents. We used to have family picnics on the beach behind the hotel. Klaasje wanted to go see the beach, but I was afraid. The Kurhaus Hotel was no longer a vacation spot for families. Instead it was now used to house German officers. The beach was not filled with picnic blankets and umbrellas, instead we saw something neither of us had ever seen here before—bunkers. Bunkers covered the beach and Nazis were preparing rockets for launch. Klaasje and I watched in shock as a large rocket was fired from the beach where we had once played.

As the war intensified so close to home, I was sent away for the second time. This time, I went north, to live with a family that already had two little daughters of their own.

The first night I arrived I joined the family for dinner, and it was wonderful. I hadn't realized just how little food I had at home until a full plate of food was sitting in front of me. The meat served with dinner was pork. Pork is not a Kosher meat, meaning it is against Jewish dietary customs to eat it. I had never eaten pork but I hadn't had meat for a long time, and I was so hungry. I gobbled it all down. It was so tasty that when everybody left the table, I ate all of the fatty leftovers too.

After dinner, it was time for bed in my new home. That night, I saw a smoked ham hanging from the rafters of the farmhouse. Like I said, I wasn't familiar with pork, so I didn't know what it was but I knew it looked tasty. I waited until the other little girls had fallen asleep, and then I let the ham down from the rafters. I took some big bites out of it, and pulled it back up like nothing had happened.

The next day, the family found my bite marks on the ham, and I was reprimanded. They told me that while I wasn't allowed to do that anymore, they promised I would not go hungry in their home.

After being malnourished for so long, eating rich foods like milk and fatty meat were a shock to my system. I started to get sick after eating my meals. Next, I broke out into a rash, and the rash turned into boils. The boils became infected. But, I couldn't go to see a doctor because no one could know that I, a Jewish child, was staying with them. I ended up getting so sick that they managed to contact my father and let him know of my condition. He decided to pick me up and take me home. On the ride home from the farm, I saw trains with Nazi soldiers on them, I also saw train cars carrying Jews. We passed trucks carrying rockets, the same kind I saw on the beach. I know now that they were V-2 rockets, the world's first long-range guided ballistic missile. The V-2 rockets were being fired close to my home, only about 10 minutes away from where I lived. The V-2 rocket program relied on slave labor. It was very dangerous to fire the rockets, as you could suffer severe or deadly burns. The Nazi soldiers didn't want to put themselves in harm's way so they used Jews, political prisoners, criminals, or others instead. They went door to door looking for people to arrest for this purpose, especially men between 16 and 40, and they were always looking for Jews in hiding.

The searches conducted by the Nazi soldiers worked like this: a whole street would be blocked off, and Nazi soldiers would go from house to house searching each from top to bottom. They were looking for Jews in hiding and for young able bodied men to work. They also looked for valuables like jewelry or art. My mom hid her jewelry in a dirty hankie in her apron. Every house on the block was searched thoroughly, and then they'd move onto the next block.

The first time I remember a Nazi soldier coming to my house, I was reading a book by the front window and there was a bang bang on the window. I looked and there was this big Nazi soldier in uniform, wearing a helmet. It was very intimidating. At the time, I was only seven and a half. My mom quickly told me to go upstairs to my bedroom and I did. The soldier searched the whole house including my bedroom, and it was terrifying. When he got downstairs, we didn't have a basement for him to search. We did have one small storage area under the kitchen floor. Instead of lifting up the trapdoor to look, he just pointed his rifle down and shot three times into the floor. Then he looked at my mother and he said, "Well, if you are hiding somebody, it sure isn't living anymore." I had nightmares for years about this experience.

My father was part of an underground Dutch resistance movement. He sometimes had me deliver messages to other people in the resistance. This was a dangerous errand. One evening, I was on my way home from delivering a message, I saw Nazi soldiers murder two men in an underpass. My quickest route home was under that underpass. I was too afraid to go that way, so I decided to turn around and take the long way home instead. I ran and ran, the whole way hoping I would make it home before curfew. When I got home, I said to my father, "I can't do this anymore."

My father decided after this incident to send me into hiding again. This was the third time that I was sent away. Before I left, my father found me a pair of shoes. I did not have any shoes that fit, and new shoes were hard to come by during the war. The shoes my father found for me had the toes cut out of them to make them fit. Next, a seamstress came. She sewed me a new coat out of my mothers' coat, adding a layer of flannel sheet in between. Now I would have three layers to keep me warm.

With my "new" shoes and coat, my father took me to board the bus. This bus was like a short school bus, there were a few adults and about 12 other young kids.

Once settled on the bus, I fell asleep leaning against the little girl sitting next to me. A few hours passed when suddenly, I was awoken by a loud noise. Our bus had been bombed. One of the adults on the bus was screaming "Get out of the bus! Get out of the bus and come back when it is safe. RUN!" It was dark outside. I went to a nearby street and I started ringing the doorbells. By about the fourth or fifth house, a woman quickly opened the door, pulled me in, and then locked the door. She checked me over for injuries. Luckily, I didn't have a scratch on me.

When it was safe, we went back to the bus to regroup. I found out that five children, including the little girl that sat next to me on the bus, had died. The surviving children, myself included, were placed in a house for the night. We got hot tea, a slice of bread, and one slice of cheese. I'll never forget that.

And then sometime later, they found us another little bus, but I couldn't sleep on this journey anymore. Now we all had the duty to sit by the window and watch for bomber airplanes.

We finally made it up north and this time I was placed in an older couple's house. The first couple of weeks, I had school each morning but then the school was made into a hospital for wounded Nazi soldiers. From school, I would go to the soup kitchen. Every morning, I got my bowl of watery soup, but that of course wasn't enough to satisfy my hunger. I learned to dig tulip bulbs, little turnips, potatoes or a little wheat out of the fields to eat.

Finally one night, I heard rumbling. I was hoping that it was the Allied forces coming to liberate us. I was told by someone on the street not to leave my room. Over the next three days, I waited and watched from the window of my bedroom. First I saw all the Nazi officers leave. They were later followed by Nazi soldiers and then finally the Hitler youth left town on stolen bicycles.

Now that the Nazis were gone, I couldn't stand to hide in my room any longer. I decided to go outside to see what was going on and look for food. The first troops I saw were English soldiers. They focused on rebuilding destroyed bridges and buildings that had been bombed in the war. I hung around outside their cafeteria hoping for food but they didn't have much extra to share with me. A few days later, the Canadian soldiers came. The bars in town reopened, so I now waited outside the bars hoping for leftovers or scraps. Then the Americans came, and one American soldier took me to the cafeteria and made me two slices of bread with butter and strawberry jam. It was wonderful.

Shortly after the Netherlands was liberated, I was sent to board a truck to take me back home. I got to the truck, and I couldn't believe my eyes. My little brother Tommy was there! He was five years old. I had no idea that he was even in hiding, let alone in the same little city as me. We were dropped off at a post office somewhere and left to find our own way home. I was taught by my father not to be afraid and that I would find my way home. Which I did.

The first thing I did when I got home was to go upstairs to look for my toys. Everything was gone. I ran downstairs, looking for my blue scooter. No scooter. I was so upset by this that I yelled at my father, "You thought I was dead; you thought I was never going to come home," and I was pretty sad. I thought he had assumed I was gone forever and gotten rid of all my things. But he said, "No. No, no. While you were gone, you had a little baby sister, and I found somebody who had food, but he wanted your toys. That's why you don't have toys." He had traded my toys for food to keep my little sister alive.

Although the war ended, things did not immediately return to normal. How could they? We had lost so much personally and on a national, and even global scale. Seventy-five percent of Dutch Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, leaving a much smaller community than existed before the war. We had all lost friends, neighbors, and family.



After the war ended, my oldest brother Klaasje, ran away at the age of 18. He left for Alberta, Canada. When I turned 20 years old, I decided to go find him, and in 1955 I settled in Canada myself. My parents remained in the Netherlands, and lived in the same home they did during the war. I returned to the Netherlands to visit them regularly until they passed away.

I got a job with the Hudson Bay Company as a sales clerk and a Dutch translator. While in Canada, I got married and had a son. Later, I moved to Phoenix, Arizona where I enrolled in college. I finished my certification as a Nursing Unit Clerk and began working in the medical field. I eventually returned to school again to get more training and left the medical field to become a records manager for the law offices of Langerman & Begam. After nearly 20 years in Arizona, I decided to move to California. Once I arrived, I went back to school for a third time, to get my Medical Insurance Brokers License. I got a job working for a large law firm near Beverly Hills where I had a lot of responsibility handling court calendars, medical insurance, and records management.

When I left California for Oregon, I returned to the medical field and worked in medical offices until I retired at age 70. I have always valued my education and hard work.

Even in retirement I keep busy! In 2000, I began speaking publicly about my experiences in the Holocaust. Since then, I have spoken hundreds of times about my life. ■