THE LIFE OF MY PARENTS IN NAZI OCCUPIED HOLLAND AND THEIR MOVE TO AMERICA

During World War II my parents Klaas and Johanna Kramer and my sister Joanne, who was then a young baby, lived in a small farming community about 30 miles north of Amsterdam, The Netherlands called HerrHugovaart. The country of The Netherlands is also known as Holland. I was born in 1946, a year after the war was over. Although my parents never talked too much about the war, my mother who lived to be 98 years old began to tell us more of the old war stories as she grew older.

To backtrack a little, my father was born on a small island called Urk in the Zuider Zee in Holland. Urk is no longer an island because now it is connected to the mainland by polders which are man made drained land. He was born to long line of commercial fishermen. They fished with nets for eel, days or even weeks at a time in relatively small boats in the rough waters of the North Sea in the Atlantic Ocean. My mother was 8 years old when she lost her mother to Diphtheria. Both my parents knew that the only way to improve their lives was thru education.

When World War II started my father was the principal of an elementary school. Here he met and married my mother who was one of the teachers at the school. During these times, and also before the war, the position of principal was not a highly paid position but the community took it upon themselves to make sure that the principal and his family were taken care of economically. Dad was given a house, which was physically attached to the school. During the war there were great food shortages. The local farmers, many of whom had children in the school, gave my parents the basic food staples such as milk and bread. Our family did not go hungry.

Others were not so fortunate. Some came to the house to ask for food. Mom was sometimes torn in deciding how much food to give away and how much she needed for her own family. She got in the habit of putting all the food that she considered extra in a container on the front stoop of the house. This container was checked frequently by those in need.

Sometimes the Gestapo (the Nazi police) came to visit Dad at school. They knew that as the principal he had access to family histories and would be able to give information as to which families had Jewish blood in them and where they lived. Sometimes they came with lists. Jewish families were often split up; the parents would be sent to the horror of one concentration camp and the children to another, never to be seen again. The now famous but tragic saga of Anne Frank was taking place nearby in Amsterdam. It's hard to exaggerate the danger that Jewish people lived in.

The number of Jewish children in Dad's school dwindled, the families were either in hiding or tragically they had been sent to Germany. There were other students, even non-

Jewish students, who came from families that were being watched by the Gestapo for various reasons. As a precaution my father set up an early warning system. His office had a window, which faced the road. If he saw German officers approach the building he sent runners to the teachers. They were instructed to discreetly and quickly send all students who might be questioned to designated safe places in the building.

Because of what the German officers saw as a lack of cooperation from my father (which was true) or perhaps just because he was a school principal, my father became "a man of interest" to the Nazis. Dad was now in the same position as the children he was protecting. Of course the Jewish people faced the greatest danger but the Gestapo would also take those who helped or harbored them. Dad decided that for his own safety and that of his family it would be best for them to leave town for a while.

Thru contacts Dad was able to find a family in central Holland, which graciously agreed to take them in for an indefinite period of time. (I do not know the exact town where this family lived or the name of the family but I am corresponding with a cousin in Holland who is now in his 80's and may be able to clear up this question and hopefully give additional information.) At any rate this town was probably a distance of a few days travel by bicycle.

My parents strapped my sister who was about 1and 1/2 year old in a seat on the back of one of the bikes and made their way to their new home. I think the thing that my mother remembered the best about this trip was that at one point my sister decided to take off one of her shoes and throw it to the side of the road. My parents didn't notice this till many miles later when they stopped to rest. They backtracked quite some distance but they never found the shoe. Those shoes were probably not replaced till after the war was over.

My parents and their brave hosts in the new home got along very well. My father no longer had to worry about his personal safety but the paranoia in this new environment was no less than that of North Holland. A man down the street had a radio in his attic. Radios were strictly forbidden. People with radios could get information about the progress the Allies were making or they could listen to Winston Churchill who, as my mother said, would exhort them to "never to give up". The man with the radio was probably betrayed by an informant. Informants unfortunately were usually other Dutch people who were paid off by the Gestapo. Informants exposed many, including Anne Frank.

The Germans decided on an interesting punishment for the radio possession. They informed all the people on this particular block that one of the houses would be blown up on a specific date. They just didn't say which house. This forced the people in about 7 or 8 houses to completely empty out their houses before the set date. The street was full of furniture. In the words of my mother: "It wasn't the house that we were staying at that they chose. It was the corner house. We all stood on the street and watched it burst into flames." Not surprisingly, it was also not the house where the radio had been found.

About ½ year later Dad got word that things had cooled off in North Holland. My parents again loaded their bicycles with what little they could and of course my sister and traveled back to HerrHugovaart. Dads old job was waiting for him. I'm not sure how the school had been run during his absence.

In late1944 the Allies were beginning to turn the course of the war (the invasion of France had begun) and the Dutch people were beginning to feel more hopeful. But my parents still had one more very frightening experience. Early one evening Dad answered a knock on the door and to his surprise about 10 or 12 German soldiers were getting out of the back of an Army truck and walking towards the house. The soldier at the door told Dad that they were moving thru and needed a place to stay overnight. They had decided that his house was a good place to stay.

Dad told Mom to take the baby upstairs and keep quiet. He would do his best dealing with the German soldiers. The soldiers sprawled out around the living room and kitchen, making themselves comfortable. My father stayed with them the whole night. They were common soldiers, not Nazi officers or the Gestapo. One of them and Dad had a conversation. The soldier said, "Don't worry, we're not here to hurt you or your family. We don't like this war any more than you do". Dad understood that the soldiers held him no ill will but he also knew that this was no time to relax. They even offered to share their alcoholic drinks with him. He politely declined. None of the soldiers tried to go upstairs where my mother and my sister were. They left early the next morning without incident.

Quite probably these soldiers who were traveling were being sent to reinforce the German fronts in Belgium and France but of course it's difficult to determine this now. The Battle of the Bulge took place not long after (Dec. '44-Jan.-45). This was actually a series of battles that took place in the Ardennes . The Ardennes are hills and forests located in Belgium about 250 miles from North Holland. This momentous battle involving about one million soldiers resulted in almost 200,000 killed or wounded. The history books tell us that the Germens left behind about 50,000 prisoners of war.

TIMELINE
Late 1944
German soldiers stay overnight at my parent's house in Holland as they pass thru.
German fronts are being reinforced to stop the progress of the Allied advances.
Dec. `44-Jan `45
Battle of the Bulge
50,000 German prisoners taken
Late 1945
The Hamlin POW Camp is open for operation till this time.
(See p.38 in the CCC/POW booklet)

Could any of these German soldiers that spent the night at my parents house have ended up in the Hamlin POW Camp that we are now excavating? The odds are somewhat slim but I think it's certainly possible.

The Canadians were the actual liberators of Holland. They received quite a welcome from the Dutch people who lined the streets as the Canadian army marched thru. Mom remembered cheering them on. These soldiers represented freedom from five years of enslavement.

After the war there was understandable resentment towards those who were suspected of being informants or traitors. These people were not always treated well. Mom told me that girls who were known to have willingly "dated" German soldiers were made to have their heads shaved as a symbol of shame. But the country slowly returned to normal. Queen Wilhelmina and the government in exile returned from England.

THE MOVE TO THE UNITED STATES

Five years after the war, in 1950 Dad decided to move his family to the US where he felt there would better opportunities for himself and his children (I was 4 years old and my sister was 7). We settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan where there was a large Dutch community of the faith that my parents belonged to, the Christian Reformed Church.

My father learned that he would have to start from scratch with his college education because his Dutch teaching degree was not accepted as valid in this country. He went to school during the day and worked nights in a factory (KiloBrass in Grand Rapids). My mother was a stay at home Mom as was the custom in those days.

He worked his way up and soon got a job as principal of a two-room elementary school and he was also teacher of the 7th and 8th grades. This was in the tiny town of Celeryville, Ohio. It was a parochial school so they could bend the rules a little about certification. Part of the deal was that while doing this job he needed to continue working for his teaching and administrative degrees at a nearby college in Ashland, Ohio. This was just what Dad wanted. We moved into a second floor apartment. During summers he made extra money by lifting 80 lbs bags at a local muck farm. He worked along side seasonal migrant workers who were from the state of Kentucky.

After being in Celeryville for two years Dad got another job as principal of a larger elementary school in Pella, Iowa where we stayed for 6 years. While he worked at Pella Christian Grade School Dad obtained his Masters Degree from Drake University and then received his PhD from the University of Iowa in the area of Math Education. In 1960 he moved to a job teaching at the college level at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Colorado.

In Colorado Dad began a career writing math education books. He published more than 30 books including an entire K-8 math series for the elementary schools. This was a huge task of many years work. As a high school student in Greeley I would go to sleep to sound of the old mechanical typewriter that usually went on till 2 or even 3AM. The next morning Dad would be up at 7 AM to teach his 8 o'clock class.

Just when this series started selling the publisher, Lyons &Carnahan was taken over by Rand McNally. Rand McNally already had a K-8 series so they decided not to push Dad's. This effectively killed what was probably Dad's lifetime achievement in education. Not much was said about this but I think it took something out of Dad. The spark didn't seem to be there after that. Dad's methods textbook for college students still did sell quite well.

My father's final move was to Brockport, New York to work at SUNY Brockport. He was highly respected as both a teacher and an author. In 1986 he suffered a massive stroke which paralyzed his full right side and rendered him completely unable to speak. He lived like this for two years till his death. He was in a Nursing Home for about a half-year. Although he was almost completely unable to communicate we could tell that he didn't like it there. Mom decided he should be home where she took care of him with the help of home nurses. My sister and I did all we could to help. Dad passed a year and a half later in 1988.

My mother outlived my father by 17 years! It was during this time that she told the stories of the Nazi occupation, which are included in this writing. Some of these true stories were told to her grandchildren. She passed in 2005 at the age of 98. She was very clear and lucid almost to the end of her life. I know now that her memories of the Nazi occupation had historical value and I should have asked her a lot more questions.

Nick Kramer
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