

LIFE IN THE DARKNESS

**BY
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I want to tell the world about my personal adventures and the conditions of the Netherlands as a whole during the German occupation between April, 1943, and the liberation of this country in April, 1945. I am grateful to G-d that I survived those years of terror, fear, oppression and danger.

In those days I lived in the village of Verssille with its friendly, goodhearted and patriotic population. In the larger cities of Holland, the Jews were being arrested on the streets and in their homes by the thousands. All were concentrated in the Dutch Camp Westerbork and from there deported to the gas and torture chambers of the Germans in Poland. Until April 8th, 1943, I worked on a farm in the village. April 10th, 1943, was the deadline set by the Germans for every Jew living in the Netherlands to report to the concentration camp. My sister and her husband, my brother, and many friends already had been sent to the camp. I decided I would not go – at least not of my own free will. I sought out a hiding place, and secretly sent word to my sister of my plans.

I understood from my friends in captivity that the conditions in Westerbork were not too bad at this time, compared with other concentration camps. The Nazis had the Jews believing that they were to go to the camps for work. They intimidated them into reporting there with threats and warnings of capital punishment if their “good advice” was not followed. My sister was so full of fear that she even asked me to come to Westerbork. She thought that victory over the Germans could only come from outside of Europe, and only with the aid of powerful weapons. The years that followed proved to the world that much could be accomplished by the Partisans.

A farmer friend promised to give me shelter but in those days the German SS upon discovering a “dangerous person” sent them to prison camp. They searched everywhere they suspected Jews or stranded soldiers of the Allied Armies or other so-called “dangerous persons” to be. In the beginning the Germans found them easily, because most of us were not experienced in this sort of deception. To make safe hiding places became a trade which could only be gained by experience. On April 7th, 1943, I was informed by the son of my friend that it would be impossible for his family to keep their promise. I found myself in a terrifying situation. I would not think of reporting to a concentration camp and now suddenly I was without a hiding place or a protector. There remained only two days to find another hiding place. Searching my mind I recalled a friend who had already been hiding for months. Here was my last

hope. It's difficult to realize fully the situation, if you've never known the world of fears, betrayers, and spies. Everything you attempted had to be done with the greatest secrecy. As darkness approached, I went to the farmhouse where my friend was hiding. There I was surprised to see four other Jews who had also found refuge from the persecution. After a long conversation with the farmer, his family, and my Jewish friends, I was introduced to the group as a member of the fast growing family. There was the farmer, his wife, three daughters, two sons, and five strangers. Every one of us had to change his name, so there was Hanna, Willem, Jan and Derk, all genuine Dutch names. Mine was Derk, and I slept with Willem who was an extremely frightened and talkative man of fifty-eight. We worked to convert a pig sty as well as we could and settled down to an uncertain future.

The first night in these surroundings was very unpleasant, and I remained sleepless all night. I thought of the fact that the fight for life and death was here. Dreams of the past filled my mind, those peaceful, happy days of my boyhood with my parents, two sisters, and three brothers. Here we sat as hunted animals. Our only chance to stay alive was to remain undiscovered until the Allied Forces could liberate us from the German "beast". The next morning we had our first breakfast, consisting of bacon, bread and coffee. The farmer's wife spoiled us by trying to make us feel comfortable and at home. After breakfast, we washed, dressed and then went to "our living room", a small room in the rear of the farmhouse.

The first few months of my stay were reasonably quiet and without incident. Our only real pleasure consisted of listening to the news broadcast of BBC, London. We switched on the radio whenever there was a newscast in English, German or Dutch. Everyone understood Dutch; some understood a little German, and some a little English. Time passed a little faster this way. Days extended into months and the routine changed little. We would arise at nine in the morning and have breakfast in "our living room". Occasionally we had the privilege of eating together with the whole family in the kitchen. We were fortunate enough to wile away some of the hours playing games like Monopoly, chess, cards or reading books. Evenings we helped the farmer feed and milk his cows. I had worked on a farm before and knew something about farming. Everyone in the house was in good spirits, laughing and merry making was still a common place incident. In the fall of 1943 the first big raids of the Germans started. The German SS searched every suspected every suspected place and home with the help of the Dutch informers. Whenever we were due for such a raid, we were warned by the Dutch Underground. The Underground always seemed to find out just in time when and where there was to be a search. If the raid came at night, we slept out under the sky with a few blankets, using our jackets as pillows. The women were also forced to go through these rigors. After a few watchful days of this, someone got the idea of using an old chicken coop about 500 yards from the farmhouse as a shelter. We covered the floor of the coop with straw and blankets. Here was our first real hiding place ready for use. In a few days, we

got more company from neighbors to spend several nights in this hideout. We stood guard every night. The whole group consisted of five men and two women. The women slept the night through, while the men stood two hour watch. Each one on duty carried for protection, a stick tipped with a heavy iron pipe. This was our only defense against an unexpected attack in the dark. I always felt safest on watch in the open. Looking at the stars while on guard made you feel lost and deserted by the whole world. Often we were able to see the night air raids of the American and British Air Forces over the biggest cities of the nearby German "Ruhrgebiet" from our vantage point. In desperation, the Germans threw up shells trying to shoot down the attacking planes. Hundreds of searchlights went into action searching for planes - - signal lights, falling planes; all this reminded you of a gigantic fireworks display. Knowing that the free world was fighting for us, helpless and defenseless victims of the Nazis, gave us new hope for victory and freedom. Maybe one of my brothers who lived in Chicago was a crew member on one of these planes helping to free his brother and all the other victims of Nazism were my thoughts on a night like this. Before dawn we returned again to the farmhouse where the farmer's wife welcomed us with warm ersatz coffee that tasted excellent after a cold and exciting night. (There was no real coffee available in Holland.) A Dutch Nazi neighbor discovered our chicken coop after several nights and told his neighbors. He swore he had missed eggs from his chicken coop and suspected they had been stolen by strangers using his chicken house for shelter. So, to avoid trouble, the following night we searched for another hiding place. We fell up on a small shed which was used in the summer as a shelter for cows. The old shed was in a sad state of decay. The wind found its way through the boards, and on the particular night we chose to occupy the shed it rained cats and dogs. We all got drenched. To add to our unfortunate circumstances, the women began to cry. About 4 a.m. we decided to bring the women to the nearby farmhouse of an anti-Nazi.

We left our friends, and Max and I started out through the darkness. Our goal was the farm where my friend's mother and brother were hiding. We stole through meadows surrounded by barbed wire and crossed small rivers with care, always expecting Dutch Nazis. After two anxious hours, we arrived at our destination. Max was so glad to see his mother and brother, and they were so surprised to see us they couldn't talk at first. We spent three days at the farm enjoying the delicious Jewish food cooked by Max's mother. Then our first guardian angel, the farmer H. J. Lievestro found us and asked if we wanted to return back to his farm. He had built a hiding place in his barn behind the farmhouse. We talked over the move and decided to accept his offer. We returned that same night to our old "home". From our vantage point we were able to watch the farmer that night very closely. H. J. Lievestro was an excellent hunter and on our return he was always intent on the road and the slightest noise did not escape him. He carried a gun wherever he went. Under his guidance I felt safest. After we had traveled about one hour, we arrived at the farm. His family and five more persecuted persons, which raised the total to seven, welcomed us.

The following day we completed work on the hiding place in the barn. All agreed that we had a good chance to escape detection in case of a search. But, to get into this hiding place required the use of a ladder to gain a small entrance at the rear of the barn about fifteen feet off the ground. It was quite a job to get the elderly women and men up the ladder and through the narrow opening. When everybody moved in, the entrance was locked and only opened again in case of a heavy air raid at night. Otherwise we had to stay there all night. We had no light other than our flashlights. Several months passed before we installed electric lights. During this time we remained for days at a time without light.

The "Netherlands Landwacht" (Dutch Homeguard) had been trained to search for subversives like us. Whenever the Germans downed an Allied plane, and the crew jumped to safety, the Germans grew irate and threatened the Dutch farmers with death for sheltering the "Enemy". In spite of these hardships the Dutch kept these crewmen in their homes until they could secretly be transferred to the British via the Dutch Underground. (It's unnecessary to mention the danger involved in breaking through the German blockade.) Many Dutch citizens risked their lives by becoming members of the Dutch Underground movement. There were many groups in the Underground, each with its own job like providing for hiding persons, supplying them with false identification cards and ration cards, and recruiting those who wanted to help. Ration cards were stolen from the Ration Card Supply Offices by armed Underground forces and distributed among the thousands of illegal persons in the Netherlands.

From June 10th, 1944, I lived with the local Protestant Minister, a Nazi until February 1943 when the Germans surrendered at Stalingrad. At that time, this man changed from Dutch Nazi to Dutch Partisan. His whole life was an adventure. Several times I accompanied him when a plane had been shot down and the crew had jumped. We helped many pilots to locate shelter and safety from German prison camps. On one of these excursions, a pilot gave me a silk handkerchief with a map of Germany and Western Europe.

During the day I sat in the garden behind the Minister's home most of the time. The house stood in the center of the village facing the square where the Germans sometimes celebrated their "perpetual victories" while we sat in a silence celebrating something worthwhile. On the morning of June 6th, I was awakened by a rap at about 5:00 a.m. A voice told me not to be frightened for he had good news; the beginning of the invasion in Normandy had started. I jumped for joy knowing that it had begun; freedom was now nearer than ever. Another surprise on that morning was the arrival of a few Jewish friends who come to stay. I was not alone anymore and had somebody to whom I could talk, with whom I could play and enjoy good meals, so rare in those days. I will never forget June 10th. We sat waiting for our friend Ray that night. He didn't show up. Every other time he had a special mission to accomplish, we knew it beforehand. However, this time he didn't tell us anything so we expected his return that night.

We waited for two days and nights and then Ray's brother returned with the news of Ray's arrest by the Gestapo. We were shocked. The Nazis had suspected Ray of being a member of the Underground for a long time, but they could never prove it. We found out that he had been found carrying false identification cards. It looked bad for Ray. We send word back to the farm of H. J. Leivestro. That same night he came to get us to return to his farm which we had left. Three of my Jewish friends didn't want to take the chance of going back. But I was tired of my sad existence in the chicken house, so I decided to return to him.

Now let me tell you a little more of the personality of this unusual individual. H. J. Lievestro was 54 years old, and didn't believe in religion but he had a heart of gold and in his simple mind a feeling for right and wrong. He was what you call an adventurer, not afraid of anything or anyone. You might compare him with our frontiersmen. He knew only the Laws of Nature and protected the weak and the poor.

To own a rifle was, by actual German law, a crime, and discovery was followed by death. Our friend secretly kept a rifle and hunted in remote desolate places. I had never seen a better hunter. Every shot was a rabbit, a deer, or some tasty bird. The game was prepared by the farmer's wife late at night. Oftentimes we would have an excellent feast around midnight. On these occasions, Leivestro would invite other "political criminals" to join us at his dinner. After dinner he would relate his interesting experience as a hunter. He told us of the position he held for a well-known Dutch Count. Among the listeners were professional men of all ages. We never grew tired of hearing these tales of adventure, and often sat listening until dawn. A friendly, pleasant atmosphere prevailed through unforgettable nights.

The Dutch farmers were required to deliver all their grain to the Germans. Our friend outfoxed them however by thrashing his own grain secretly and distributing it among his friends. This was a form of sabotage on the German war machine, practiced by many Dutch farmers. About three weeks after our return to the farm, the expected raid became a reality. Late one night we were awakened by the noise of yelping dogs, the banging of rifles against the door, and voices swearing in German. We realized at once what was going on. I could hear my heart beating in my mouth; our lives hung by a thread. To survive this ordeal would depend on lady luck or G-d's will. One half hour passed almost noiselessly. Then, all of a sudden the barn doors were smashed open. We heard the snarling men's voices as they bumped into the farm machinery in their search for us. The machinery was scattered in all directions with a purpose. These characters tried to bait us out of hiding by saying, "Come out, we know you are hear, etc. ". We heard them over our hiding place, downstairs in the barn, and outside. We were surrounded. To avoid detection, we kept as quiet as possible. About one hour passed, and we heard them close the barn door and leave. We felt like someone suffering from an incurable disease who had just been restored to health. We prayed in silence and thanked G-d for his

protection. After all this excitement was over, we slept well. In the morning, we heard all the details of the night's happening that night. Our farmer friend was worn out but happy with his personal victory over the hated Nazi gangsters. Sixteen men of the German SS, together with some members of the Dutch Homeguard, searched the house for two hours while the whole family was held in the living room. Leivestro himself, with two guns at his back and threats of being killed if he didn't give up the Jews, led the bandits around the farm. He was so sure of himself and his whole family that he told them, "If you think that I have Jews in the house, go ahead and try to find them. I can't tell you where they are because I haven't got any illegal people in my house." The crude and stupid soldiers were fooled by a good-natured fearless man. Similar cases were reported from other places in that district. One farmer was beaten and tortured to death, but he didn't utter a word and saved a Jewish woman and her daughter who were hidden on his farm. The farmer's daughter had been blindfolded and questioned about the Jews hidden there, but she didn't make a sound even when the Nazis shot their pistols in the air trying to frighten her into confessing. Hate toward that gang must have made her firm, and saved the lives of two human beings. September, 1944, saw a month of victories for the Allied Armies. After the occupation of France, there followed an amazingly fast march through Belgium and the southern states of Holland. September 15th was a day of hope and joy. The BBC news told us of an invasion by paratroopers of Holland at Arnheim, which is about 20 miles away Versville. We had expected something special for weeks, for thousands of planes had appeared in the sky by day and night without interruption. Flying fortresses bombed the city of Arnheim while Hurricanes, Mustangs, Spitfires and other fighters attacked the railroads, highways and concentration of German troops. We enjoyed the amazing flying ability of the American and British pilots, masters of the air, battling German Messerschmidts. We witnessed, with satisfaction, enemy planes bursting into pieces on their way down. Fear soon filled the hearts of the disloyal Dutch Nazis. Knowing the Allied Armies were on their heels, they fled in groups over the border to Germany. There were days of triumph for us. We stood in the open singing "God Bless the King" and the "Star Spangled Banner".

The events of the next few weeks forced the pendulum of sentiment to swing from extreme optimism to extreme pessimism. Allied paratroopers couldn't make any progress at the Arnhem bridgehead on the Rhine with the house to house fighting tactics of the Germans. This delay was caused by information turned over to the Germans by the reknown Dutch traitor, King Kong. We were reduced to seven more anxious months of isolation. It seemed to us like an eternity. Waiting for our liberation from German terror and oppression was like hell. We were all very nervous. With the cooperation of the farmer's family, during these dark days, twenty-five lives were saved.

One sunny day in October, another adventure worth noting took place. About two o'clock in the afternoon, while most of the farmers were still at lunch, which meant they were having an afternoon nap, we were awakened by the sound of

rifle shots nearby. A few minutes later, the back door was flung open and an excited farmer ran in followed by a pale looking young man. The farmer ordered all the doors locked and bolted, and asked us to disappear into our hideout as quickly as possible. It was a particularly lucky thing that we had built a second hiding place inside the house only a few days before. If we would have had to run to the barn behind the house, we never would have been able to get there before the German pursuers had surrounded the farm in an effort to capture the escaped the Dutch student. This boy had refused to work in the German war plants so he was forced to become a partisan like many others. Quickly, all of us, eight adults and a child of six, disappeared. The farmer's wife opened the front door pretending to be awakened by the loud voices. We heard every word she spoke. She stood unafraid before the impudent German SS men acting like an ignorant farmer's wife. The SS troopers entered the house and searched every room from top to bottom but without result. When they finally entered the living room, usually occupied by us, they stood bewitched by a picture of Adolf Hitler standing on the mantelpiece. They saluted and excused their rough appearance with unexpected kindness. Meanwhile, the farmer had wiped out the visible footsteps of the student in the sand behind the house. He did this by carefully sliding with his wooden shoes through the sand, as he went out to his fields carrying a pitchfork on his shoulder. Again we were saved by the farmer's family through a simple act of kindness. In the weeks that followed, the Germans were short of manpower. To form a new defense line with tank traps and trenches, they recruited every Dutch citizen between the age of sixteen and fifty-five. The manhunt went on. Hundreds and thousands of Dutch men dug trenches in the soil cultivated by their fathers before them. Hate toward the German oppressor was increased, for the men were attacked by Allied planes while digging. They tried to protect themselves from the shower of bullets but were driven back by their German guards.

The last war-winter was a hard one. Food and firewood grew scarce. The people from the larger cities came to the country trying to find ways to stave off hunger and seek refuge from the attacking planes and guns. Still the most dangerous enemy was land and master in this land of poverty. Before the war, the Germans called this country the "land of milk and honey". Now, they could have called it "the land of hunger, blood and tears".

The further the Germans retreated, the more furiously they attacked the civilians. We were surrounded by German soldiers; two of them came to live under the same roof with us. From this time until the liberation about two weeks later, we were unable to leave our hiding place. Our presence was never detected by these soldiers. The farmer's wife brought us food, secretly. We were afraid to move in the hideout. The slightest noise could have awakened their suspicion and might have cost our lives.

I'll never forget my birthday on March 19th, 1945. The approaching cannons and machine guns sounded like a symphony of freedom. The Allied Armies were

marching and nothing could hold them anymore. We had no fear, for bullets and bombs meant escape from the Germans. We could only think of freedom, life and happiness, which we expected with the liberation by our American and British Allies.

April 1st, 1945 (Easter Sunday), at 9:00 a.m., we were liberated by the First Canadian Army.

Only he who has gone through years of fear, injustice, persecution and oppression can imagine what it means to be free, not to be hunted like a wild animal, to go wherever you want, not to have to live in a stuffy, dark barn. It's like giving a caged bird their freedom. It all seemed like a dream - - the first American cigarettes, hundreds and hundreds of tanks, trucks, and cars; smiling faces all around you, happiness wherever you looked, men weeping for joy, women kissing their suntanned liberators. To be a witness to these scenes, on this unforgettable, bright Easter morning in a small Dutch village, was a like a dream. Our greatest expectations cannot conceive of such a site. In a moment like that, you really appreciate being among the people that survived. Hardship makes one stronger in life and better in his relations to his neighbors.