

CHAPTER ONE - Alkmaar

I WAS BORN in the early evening of 28 October 1939 in a building that stood about eighteen feet below sea-level on reclaimed land in the polders surrounding Alkmaar - St Elisabeth hospital. This may go a long way to explain my dislike of mountains (fine as a scenic backdrop, definitely not to be climbed or skied upon) and liking for water scenes. But when I came later in life to live on the bank of the Thames, I refused to swim in it, even after a new standard of cleanliness, unprecedented since prehistoric times, was established, because I felt unable to plunge into water I could not see through. Salmon were allegedly sighted in London's river in the latter part of the twentieth century but as a lifelong sceptic I always suspected they were contained in tins labelled John West.

My mother

My English grandmother Harriet's first husband, Tom, the father of her eight children, bore the Irish name Devanney (from Limerick, whence his parents came) and died of pneumonia in 1917. Too old to go to the front, he nonetheless was serving in the army at the time. His death left his large family in acute poverty. My mother, Kathleen Susan (1905-1994), had to give up a scholarship she had won to a foundation school near the family home in Spitalfields and go out to work at fourteen, something she always regretted. Her education perforce fell far short of her intellect (still a commonplace fact for so many English children of modest origins) but she was able to make up for this later. She started as a shopgirl at Selfridge's department store in Oxford Street, London, but became bored and, unbeknownst to her mother, resigned to become a clerk in the tea trade. She developed a passionate interest in the stage, especially Shakespeare, and would queue for hours for a last-

minute, cut-price ticket to one of London's rich array of West End theatres. She retained an encyclopedic knowledge of the theatre and its performers to the end of her life.

My mother's elder brother, John, who might otherwise have become the main breadwinner, had been an underage volunteer in the British Army, and was killed in France in the dying weeks of the 1914-18 war. Their eldest sister, Mary, died giving birth to my cousin, Brenda, adopted by the next-oldest sister, Lily, whose only child she thus became. Indeed all six surviving siblings - five sisters and one brother - had just one child each, perhaps a reaction, conscious or not, to childhood in a large, financially struggling family headed, until his untimely death, by a vegetable-porter at Spitalfields Market. His widow kept the family close together and they all prospered in a modest way eventually. Harriet was the only grandparent I ever knew.

My mother was old enough to remember the first bombardment of London in all its history, by German Zeppelin airships, succeeded from June 1917 by Gotha biplane bombers. The very first Zeppelin raid on 31 May 1915 wrecked a building in Farringdon Road, when she was ten, and is commemorated by a plaque I used to pass every day when I worked at *The Guardian*, then just up the road, some sixty-five years later. She remembered watching the airships' slow flight, caught in the searchlight beams, from the family home on the eastern edge of the City of London. These raids bear no comparison with the intensity of the "Blitz" of the Second World war, but they were unprecedented and Londoners were understandably terrified as they took to hastily prepared air-raid shelters. After nine centuries without invasion, apart from the small matter of the triumphant Dutch landing by the Prince of Orange

– later King William III of England – in 1688, deceptively named the “Glorious Revolution”, the Channel and the Royal Navy could no longer protect the general population of Great Britain from direct enemy attack. The era of total war by air as well as land and sea had arrived.

My own first memories are inextricably associated with the Nazi-German occupation of the Netherlands in the second great war, which began for Holland when I was barely six months old and ended five years later, almost to the day. It was thus my mother's second war but my own first - and also my father's, as the Dutch were neutral in 1914-18. The only shot my father heard in World War I came from the Mauser rifle of his elder brother Titus, mobilised in 1914 who, while on leave, accidentally fired it through the roof of the family home in Groningen, close to the German border in the north-east of the Netherlands.

My father

My father, Daniel Gerhard van der Vat, was born in the city of Groningen on 15 August 1909 to Dominicus Hieronymus van der Vat, merchant draper, and his wife Elisabeth, née Albering, who eventually managed the first branch of C&A to open in the Netherlands, at Sneek (Friesland). He was one of eleven children of this devout, Roman Catholic couple living in a strongly Calvinist region adjacent to Friesland (the Dutch province encompassing western Frisia, the eastern part being across the border in north-west Germany). Their Catholicism was crucially important, as will become clear. Both originated in Friesland and retained strong connections with a province that still boasts its own language, related to the rest of the Netherlands in ways that makes it a sort of Dutch Wales. One of their children died in infancy, leaving eight boys and twin girls.

My Frisian grandfather was a religious fanatic. As each of his sons reached school-leaving age he did his best to persuade him to enter the RC priesthood. In two cases he succeeded. Two of my uncles actually became full-blown Franciscan monks and had distinguished careers in the order: one, Odulfus, became the order's head of mission in Brazil while the other, the youngest brother Gerhard, ended his career in charge of a popular parish in The Hague area.

But two more of the brothers, my uncle Jan and my father, also entered the order and eventually suffered what used to be called nervous breakdowns because they were clearly not suited for the monastic life or the priesthood. My father had already taken the "minor vows" of the order and needed a papal dispensation releasing him from them. So, he went to Groningen university instead, deciding as he climbed the entrance steps for his admission interview to study English (he always said it could just as well have been mathematics, French or German). He received no financial support from his father and relied on sneak visits to his mother, whose managerial job (unusual for a woman, especially a married one, at the time) gave her the means, for cash handouts when he entered the family house by the back door. It was thus more than ironic that the old man stated in his will that he was leaving nothing to his only academic son because of the financial support he had received! He went on to gain a doctorate in English literature, *magna cum laude*. He did his research in Denmark, then the cheapest place in Europe for such endeavours, before completing his studies in London, where he worked in the famous British Museum reading room once patronised by Karl Marx. His thesis, in English, was a study of the English Romantic poets.

While in England in 1935 he took a break in the Lake District at a hostel in Keswick run by the Holiday Fellowship, a non-profit cooperative that still offers inexpensive vacations to its tens of thousands of members after more than a century. There he met my mother and showed off to her by swimming out to an island in Derwentwater. My mother, who had been clerking in a tea warehouse and finally rose to be chief book-keeper of the electrical retailer Curry's, helped fund the final phase of his studies. My father gained his doctorate in June 1936 and returned to Holland to start a teaching career, but they kept in touch and finally married in London in April 1938.

The bullying by my Dutch grandfather did not cease when my father and his brother Jan got out of the priesthood and recovered from their traumas. On each occasion when one of his children produced a son, the old patriarch pressed the new parents to name the baby after him. He proposed to my parents in their turn when I was born in October 1939 that they name me Dominicus Hieronymus, a pompously inflated Latinisation of the names Dominic and Jerome (Jeroen in Dutch). My parents gallantly resisted his suggestion, naming me after my father and adding Francis (probably an appeasing nod to grandfather's favourite saint – I can find no other reason) and then Jeroen (vernacular for Hieronymus) to my stock of given names. That was bad enough in terms of the mild bullying I experienced at school in London associated with my funny foreign name. What I might have endured had the dreadful secret burden of Dominicus Hieronymus been discovered, as it inevitably would, does not bear thinking about. Both Dutch grandparents died in 1941, so I never knew them. My mother did and found them hard to like. When my father died in 1977, almost the first thing she did was to remove his mother's photograph, a typical, grim Edwardian-era portrait, from his study wall and destroy it. It was

remarkably similar to the photograph of my wife's paternal grandmother which hung for many years on the wall of our home.

Jeroen was all right in the end – I could point out grandly that the early Dutch master-painter Hieronymus Bosch was informally known in Holland as Jeroen Bos, and that the English translation was Jerome (even that was a bit posh to some). This was a diversion on my part, since grandfather undoubtedly had the illustrious doctor of the early church in mind rather than the artist named after him, notorious for his louche, drug-fuelled but brilliant paintings. So those school contemporaries who did not call me Vandy used Jerry as my moniker. It could have been worse. Be that as it may, I was called Jeroen by my mother and her family, as two Da(a)ns in the house would have caused confusion, she thought. I did not fully “emerge” as Dan (Daniel to the National Health Service only) until I left home for university.

My father meanwhile in the 1940s wrote a series of very successful children's books about a small boy called Jeroen who had all sorts of fantastical adventures. As a result the name became popular in Holland after their post-war publication under my father's literary *nom de plume* of Daan Zonderland (“landless” - because he lived abroad for so long). They have remained in print. His nonsense-verse earned him the sobriquet of the "Dutch Edward Lear" - they too have remained in print. There were those who suggested that had I gone on living in Holland under the name Jeroen van der Vat, I might have shared the “fate” of Christopher Robin Milne in England as a “son-of”. Even though many people knew that Daan Zonderland was really Daan van der Vat (his journalistic byline), I think that is probably unlikely. On the other hand, when I have signed in to Dutch hotels with my real name I have quite often been asked, “are you the son of...?”

There was a time in the late 1960s and 1970s when my father's paper, *De Tijd* (which means "The Time") of Amsterdam, took the syndication service of *The Times* of London and published articles of mine extracted from it. By this time my father was living and working in Holland once more, in Amsterdam, and friends would stop him on the street and say, accusingly, "but the paper says you are in Pakistan/Rumania/America!" So, I briefly enjoyed the byline (in Holland only) of Dan van der Vat *junior*. The distinction between his byline – Daan with two As – and mine with just one was too subtle for most readers. But it gave us both a good laugh.

My father was a "difficult" man, not at all easy to live with. Given his fraught early life and his insufferable father, this is hardly surprising. He was extremely intelligent, highly sensitive and also a romantic, unable to suffer fools gladly. He had a quick temper and often gave off an air of suppressed anger, sometimes restrained with difficulty. He hit me a very few times, though not hard – I can remember each occasion – but this could hardly be classified as abuse in an age that tolerated casual physical chastisement of naughty children. He hated being interrupted while working at home, which made life awkward as he followed this practice for nearly the whole of his time as London correspondent of an evening newspaper. Fortunately, he was usually finished for the day by lunchtime. If I needed his attention, I soon learned one or two manipulative tricks, such as waiting until he put down one newspaper and picked up another or pulled a sheet of paper out of his typewriter and rolled in a new one, thus interrupting himself. But in the end, he was a loving, even proud and always generous father and grandfather, and managed to show it convincingly from time to time. And the suffering that marked the end of his rather short life surpassed that of his youth.

Like a good Dutchman, he was fond of gin as well as fine wine; but when he forced himself to give up drinking for a couple of weeks, he almost exploded with frustration. It was prudent to stay out of his way. He expected my mother to provide a smooth-running home, including looking after me, but did not abuse her to my knowledge. He provided the means without a trace of meanness – my mother was the thrifty (but also generous) one. He wisely let her run the household finances and took no interest in such things as insurance or pensions, or even cash beyond ensuring his wallet contained enough for a trip to the pub or the oft-visited florist. Although she never worked after her marriage, she managed the money consummately, as was proved during his long illnesses. He did show her due respect most of the time, which was also wise, because my mother was tougher than she looked. There were several occasions when she put her foot down and would not be budged. On the other hand, she had taken the trouble to join a *cordon bleu* cookery course before she got married – she knew this was the direct route to her man’s heart - and became a wonderful cook. At least my father unreservedly appreciated this side of her – as did I.

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My early memories of wartime Holland are naturally few but remain vivid to this day. They are fortunately isolated recollections, which ensured, I assume, that I was not traumatised by them. The war in Europe began eight weeks before my birthday and engulfed would-be neutral Holland by means of a treacherous German invasion just over eight months afterwards. Hitler’s contrived excuse was the “Venlo incident” in which two British intelligence officers were lured to a meeting with German purported anti-Nazi plotters at the Dutch border town. There they were kidnapped by SS agents and driven over the frontier amid a welter of confected propaganda.

Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Stevens and Captain Sigismund Payne Best spent the rest of the war as prisoners. Goebbels made the most of their naive blunder and so did the Wehrmacht, which overran the Netherlands inside a week in May 1940 by the simple expedient of bombing the heart out of Rotterdam before the German ultimatum expired and promising that the next stop would be Utrecht. The antiquated Dutch air force and the overwhelmingly outclassed Dutch army surrendered; at least honour was satisfied by some fierce resistance on the part of soldiers and marines around Rotterdam and elsewhere. Some naval ships and submarines escaped to join the British, who laid on a warship to rescue Queen Wilhelmina, her cabinet and the gold reserves. With the exception of Poland, crushed between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army, no nation suffered more under the Nazis.

I am fortunate enough to possess an invaluable “crib” for this earliest period in my life. I had the wit to persuade my mother, a few years before she died in 1994, to write down her recollections of life as an Englishwoman in Nazi-occupied Holland. The result was an immaculately handwritten text of some 10,000 words produced when she was eighty years old, which I eventually got around to publishing as a small book, incorporating a detailed commentary by me. I then sent the original to the Dutch Institute for War Documentation. Although my mother had been forced to leave school at fourteen, her text is a model of “clear thoughts clearly expressed” which needed hardly any editing. It makes me as a latter-day historian mourn for the great rivers of personal memoir that might have flowed on to posterity but have not done so: my wife, for example, had relatives whose recollections might well have matched my mother’s in interest but were not recorded.

Two days after their marriage on 21 April 1938, they moved into a rented house on Corfstraat in Alkmaar. My father taught my mother Dutch, and her keen ear soon mastered the strangulated vowels and catarrhal consonants of the language. Less than four months after my birth, the owner of the house gave my parents three months' notice to leave as she felt unsafe living close to the German border (little did she know...). In mid-February 1940 we moved to a fine house in the Blekerskade, close to the Lyceum where my father was teaching English.

On 10 May 1940 the Germans, no doubt emboldened by their easy success in Poland, launched their mighty *Blitzkrieg* in the west against France and the Low Countries. Essentially it was an updated repeat of the opening of the First World War in the west, this time led by tanks, aircraft and paratroops rather than infantry - the Schlieffen Plan mark II with wheels and wings - and this time it worked. Holland fell within five days, as we saw, Belgium surrendered on 28 May, Paris fell on 14 June and France signed an armistice on the 22nd. Most of the British Army, bereft of its equipment, escaped via Dunkirk thanks to a still not fully explained German "pulled punch".

Harsh restrictions were imposed by the occupiers from the outset. Rationing was introduced, new identity papers (necessary to obtain ration cards) were imposed, and rations shrank steadily over the next five years to virtually nothing at the end.

Holland's massive dairy-farming industry, which exported most of its produce to Germany in peacetime, was systematically milked dry for the benefit of the Wehrmacht and the German population (although farmers usually managed to keep something back for themselves, their families and friends - and some for the black

market). Petrol and other fuels all but disappeared. The savage winter of 1944-45 made me cry for cold as windows cracked under the stress of indoor frost.

My mother, already aware of the Nazi penchant for rounding up "undesirables" such as Jews, who soon began to suffer steadily intensifying persecution, feared that she would be arrested as an enemy alien. But she underestimated German legalism, which ran in parallel to Nazi contempt for human rights: she might be British-born but she had married a Dutchman and therefore had Dutch nationality. So she never spoke English in public, and as little Dutch as possible for fear her accent might betray her. She constantly worried that, when I began to speak, I might blurt out something in English. Apparently while on a bus with her I did just that; an elderly lady on the seat behind thereupon said to her companion (in Dutch), "Is that little boy speaking Russian?"

Alarmed by friends who would sometimes phone and breezily ask what the latest news from London might be, my parents requested the Post Office to remove the telephone. The only communication with England was by strictly censored Red Cross postcards with a few formulaic sentences to tick and a small space for spontaneous remarks that were often blacked out by the Germans. Even this tiny window was closed in 1944.

Well into the second year of occupation my parents were evicted with ten days' notice to make way for some German officers. The Lyceum was also taken over temporarily as a barracks. My father marched down to the German town major's office to protest at the eviction. His complaint was of course dismissed out of hand; but the officer complimented him on his German. My father had been a Germanophile before the

invasion. He attended a boarding school at Venraai (run by the Franciscans, of course) on the German border and used to take the train over the frontier with his fellow-students for a few beers; it was the time of the Great Inflation and they used to hurl leftover banknotes with their absurd denominations out of the train windows on the return journey. My father's favourite poet was Rainer Maria Rilke and he was a master of the language (and several others); but after the invasion he swore he would never cross the German border again. As will be seen, I was responsible for his eventual default on this undertaking.

Unable to find a new home to rent in ten days, we were forced to take lodgings in the beautiful village of Bergen-Binnen, a few miles from Alkmaar and linked to it by a steam-powered tram. This was probably my mother's favourite spot in her adopted country even though she was forced to witness drunken German officers smashing up the local restaurants. I took my own family on holiday there from Germany twice. It was while my father was up in Groningen in September 1941 for his own father's funeral that my mother, alone with me in Bergen, was told that a house had become available to rent back in Alkmaar, at the very edge of town on a street called Westerweg. So after barely three weeks in Bergen we moved to the address which saw us through the rest of the war and a few months of peace until the move to London.

The house was the last in the street before the Alkmaar woods began. In front of it was a service road, then the street proper and then a large barracks, built for the Dutch army in the First World war, after which it became a youth camp. Now it reverted to its original purpose but giving shelter to an army of occupation. I used to watch the German troops being paraded and drilled when my mother was not

looking: what little boy wouldn't. In May 1944 I collected "window" (metal ribbon dropped by Allied aircraft to confuse German radar during the preparations for the invasion of Normandy). The Lyceum where my father worked close by reverted in its turn to being a school for over-16s. He carried on teaching English and had to take on the duties of the English master of the local gymnasium (grammar school) - a Jew who had been forced to go into hiding. It made for long and exhausting days at the Lyceum. The headmaster of the gymnasium was also Jewish and similarly went into hiding. My parents stored some of his furniture in our attic when his half-Jewish wife was forced to evacuate their home. My mother helped to feed another Jewish couple and their daughter who spent the war in hiding in a large house belonging to a friend and near-neighbour. She was staggered when they asked that their food be cooked in separate pans to ensure its kosher purity... But they survived, unlike the vast majority of Holland's pre-war Jewish population, and my mother recorded how they emerged into the daylight white as alabaster after the liberation, barely able to walk.

The Germans decided to clear the entire civil population out of Den Helder. This town is just a few miles north-west of Alkmaar. It was then, as it is now, the Dutch Portsmouth, the main base of the navy, and the Germans decided to seal it off for their own purposes. The consequence was that households in the nearby towns, such as Alkmaar, were forced to take in a family from Den Helder. The Dutch officials organising the evacuation promised that the lodgers imposed would be as far as possible from similar backgrounds, but we got a grocer, his wife and their two small children, who took over half the house, including my father's study, where they did their cooking. Relations, especially between the men, were fraught, and there was little privacy, my mother recalled.

The occupiers made rather desultory efforts to round up men under 35 (later raised to 40) for forced labour in Germany. My father had friends in the town with houses large enough to hide in, typically under the floorboards. But our adult male lodger had no friends in Alkmaar and had to conceal himself in a specially made, cramped compartment under the first-floor landing of our house. The first such round-up was a general order for all men of the relevant age to assemble at the end of their respective streets with a change of clothes and some food for the journey over the border. Only two men obeyed this call, probably strong contenders for the title of village idiot; the others hid as best they could until the "flap" was over. Later, house-to-house searches were carried out. The Germans, ever methodical, followed a schedule, which meant that if a search was to be conducted in the town of Haarlem on a Friday, it would be Alkmaar's turn on the following Tuesday. This meant it was clear on which days men should vanish. Our house was searched several times by a soldier or two, on which occasions my mother would confine me and the lodgers' children to the garden or shed with strict orders to say nothing (she feared I would blurt something in English, a constant nightmare). One soldier stuck his bayonet into the ceiling of the hall on the ground floor, close to the lodger's hideout under the landing above.

Curiously, once the search was over the Germans ignored the fact that many able-bodied men were soon openly going about their business in the town. The troops, having obeyed orders, also carried on as normal. On one occasion my father and another local man were made to patrol all night at a spot where the resistance had blown up a German vehicle. They took their turn with other pairs of local men. As reprisals went, this was positively lenient. The worst aspect turned out to be the

unexpected kindness of the German sentry supervising the pair, who shared some plums he had scumped with his charges. The shift lasted from 10 pm to 4 am.

When it ended, both men were clutching their stomachs in agony... But although of deportable age, neither man was detained further.

Apart from the Den Helder children, there were one or two others of my sort of age living in the Westerweg, in particular a boy called Kees or Cees, who kindly shared his scooter with me. Toys were very scarce, and my favourite, I'm told, was a cardboard box in which I spent many happy hours pretending to be in a boat. I also had a sledge which I deployed with such enthusiasm in the harsh winter of 1944-45 that I gave myself a hernia. My father had to transport me to the hospital in the curfew period on his bicycle (which had no tyres) for treatment, and against much parental scepticism I always insisted I could remember being held up by my ankles as a doctor pushed the errant intestine back into place with his thumb!

I believe it was in 1943 that my father was invited by the students' union to a college in the southern Dutch town of Tilburg to give the annual end-of-year lecture.

Although he worked as a schoolteacher throughout the war, he had been destined for a career, and had actually been appointed, as a lecturer at Leiden University, the so-called "Dutch Oxford", and had given his inaugural public lecture on "the Poetic Principle of Edgar Allen Poe" in October 1938. It appears he was still waiting to take up this post when the war supervened. The Leiden students protested against the invasion by looting a train full of German uniforms and wore them at a wild fancy-dress party. The university was promptly shut down for the duration.

His main academic preoccupation at this time was and remained the three leading Roman Catholic novelists in the English language - James Joyce, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, about whose work he wrote in academic journals and elsewhere, becoming the leading Dutch expert on the trio. Regardless of his later career in journalism he would, many years after the war, twice be offered a professorship in English literature - first at Amsterdam and later at Strasbourg. So he went to Tilburg and gave his talk - subject unknown but probably some aspect of English literature - and was taken aside afterwards by a member of the audience. This turned out to be one of the editors of *De Tijd*, the Amsterdam newspaper, who made him an offer he could not refuse.

My mother could not believe her ears when he came home from Tilburg and casually asked, "How would you like to move to London after the war?" He had been offered the post of London correspondent, and on acceptance received a retainer until he was free to take up the post. He was able meanwhile to write a literary article or two. This also enabled him to give up half his double teaching load at last, which in turn gave him the time to start writing his children's books and verse.

But the war was not over yet. A group of German officers commandeered the house next door. They used to pile their (stolen) bicycles against the chain-link fence between our front garden and theirs. As little boys are wont to do, I idly pushed and pulled the fence until the stack of bikes fell over. Terrified, I remember running and running until I could take refuge with a friendly family who lived nearby. When I returned to the Westerweg to show my grandson where I had lived as a small boy, I found that this breathless run of vivid memory had been a mere few yards round the corner.

In the last few months of occupation, my mother went to the butcher to collect our meat ration for three - one slice of corned beef. She never went back. In the last terrible winter a food-kitchen was set up at the edge of the woods by our house, from which we collected boiled sugar-beet and potato peel (actually the most nutritious part of that humble vegetable, but we did not know this at the time, and it took me many years before I could even contemplate eating a potato "in its jacket"). I still do not like beetroot...

Starvation loomed for many, and more than 10,000 people died of it in the notorious "Hunger Winter" of 1944-45, about which my late friend and colleague Henri van der Zee, for many years London correspondent of *De Telegraaf* of Amsterdam, wrote the definitive book. My parents had fortunately and coincidentally befriended two local families - the Keyspers and the Heuseveldts - who owned, respectively, a grocery and a department store. The latter couple had a daughter who was having trouble with her English and who regularly visited my mother for conversation practice. Insofar as it was possible for a four-year-old boy I fell in love with this girl... These good people helped us survive, as did a few barter deals, and if all else failed, the black market, which functioned throughout the war and supplied all manner of goods - at prices that were usually stratospheric. Mr Heuseveldt was the proud owner of a new American Buick car in 1940 and, determined to deny it to the enemy, boldly concealed it in the middle of his shop by building false partitions and shelving round it. I remember having rides in it after the war.

My father had got to know a teacher in Copenhagen during his literary research there in the 1930s. Thanks to some impenetrable quirk in the minds of our German jailers,

also occupying Denmark, he was allowed to send a food parcel from time to time. Learning that there was no salt available in Holland, this noble teacher, Henning Nøsted, got each of his pupils to bring in a twist of paper containing a pinch of salt for inclusion in his parcel. Sometimes the package did not arrive and had to be assumed stolen. At other times it was necessary to collect it from the main post office in The Hague, which meant someone had to be paid to cycle there and fetch it. The more or less regular cardboard box from Denmark became my favourite plaything. A wooden spoon became my paddle.

Like many other, if not most, people in northern Holland, my parents heard of the Allied invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944 with joy - and then trepidation as the occupation bore harder and harder on the people. They kept a primitive but effective crystal wireless set (illegal and harshly punishable) hidden variously in the oven or the anthracite stove, both of which were useless for lack of fuel. There was hardly any food and very little electricity. Finally water was rationed to two hours a day, which meant no hot water or laundry and led to flea and lice infestation, a development my house-proud mother regarded as the ultimate humiliation. But it was during this lowest period that my parents, forced to go to bed very early just to keep warm and with no light to read by, set about closing some of the gaps in my mother's education. My Dutch father taught his English wife about Shakespeare, whose plays she already knew and loved, and the uniquely rich literature of her country.

One extraordinary event in the last days which we witnessed, and which I vividly recall, was operation "Manna", which literally came from heaven: Swedish diplomats persuaded the Germans to allow Allied bombers to drop food supplies to alleviate the

effects of the Hunger Winter on the civil population in the last occupied north-western segment of the county at the end of April 1945. The Lancaster bombers and Flying Fortresses we had recently seen and heard high overhead on their way to bomb Hamburg and the Ruhr now flew low and released a rain of food parcels. Powdered egg, milk and yeast, condensed milk, flour, dehydrated meat, tea and chocolate were among the delights that saw us through the final days of the occupation. One such drop took place near our house along the railway line between Alkmaar and Bergen airfield. On a visit to Canada in 1994 to publicise my book about D-Day I met a few frail Royal Canadian Air Force veterans who had taken part in this mission of mercy. It was a uniquely emotional experience for me.

We were liberated by the Canadian army, which had come over the north-west German border into northern Holland in the last weeks of the war in Europe. I had prepared for their arrival in our town on 4 May by inserting two flags - the red, white and blue Dutch tricolour and the orange flag of the royal house - on bamboo sticks crosswise in the chicken-wire of the front gate. One of the sticks broke, and I was inconsolable. But I was the only child around who could chat up the Canadian soldiers in English, and I was rewarded with a ride on a tank and a generous supply of (to me) enormous NAAFI biscuits, the like of which I had never seen and which soon made me ill.

A Captain Jack Stirling was billeted on us and asked my linguist father on behalf of the officers' mess to liaise with local farmers and other suppliers now happily selling hidden stocks to the liberators. My parents were often presented with unprocessed food they had not seen for five years. When the Canadians were relieved by the British army, this unofficial generosity continued, including on one occasion my

mother never forgot, an entire joint of roast beef from their canteen. One soldier befriended by my mother was able to tell her family in London that we were fine when he went home on leave. Eventually a parcel arrived from my mother's family in London. It included a pair of shoes for me, but they had forgotten I was no longer a toddler and they were far too small to enable me to give up the clogs I had happily worn for years. My mother cried, but later bartered the shoes for something she could use.

On his departure Captain Stirling gave me a few old coins he had "liberated" from a German prisoner; he also left my father twenty bottles of real Dutch gin, taken from the Germans, from his officers' mess which in those days could have made him rich - but which he prudently and selflessly handed over to the Resistance. My proudest possession from this period is a photograph of me marching up and down alongside, and in step with, a British sentry, a stick on my left shoulder serving as my rifle.

