

The underdiver

Jenny Radsma

*Veel te weten is veel te begrijpen.
'To know much is to understand much.'*



In a black-and-white photo, my father leans forward from the kitchen chair on which he sits. Beside him, my sister's future father-in-law, a quiet, reserved man, watches from "Dad's chair" as we called it, bemused at the antics of my boisterous

father who, laughing, stretches his arm towards the camera, a glass of wine held aloft in his hand. On the border of the photo is the date, August 1969, and the occasion is my older sister's engagement party. By then, proud citizens of their new homeland, my parents have lived in Canada for 16 years. The following year, in May 1970, the world would commemorate the 25th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, and people like my parents would celebrate the never-to-be-forgotten sweet taste of liberation.

The war underscored so much of my sisters' and my upbringing, a continual presence overshadowing every conversation we had, every meal we ate, every decision our family made, every dime my parents spent, every prayer my father uttered at the conclusion of our mealtimes. My mother reminded her children regularly of our blessings, that as children we would never know hunger as she and my father had, what with our well-stocked pantry and the daily delivery of fresh milk; we always wore clean, well-mended clothes even if purchased at a second-hand store; we washed ourselves every morning with fresh-smelling soap and warm water running from the tap; we never had occasion to sleep on flea-infested mattresses, nor did we ever have to apply kerosene oil to quell the lice crawling on our scalps as happened more than once to my parents during the war.

For me as a child, the country from where my parents emigrated, Holland, remained a distant, far-away place from which stories abounded about relatives whom I had never met, how times had changed since my father's and mother's childhood, about family who still lived in the fatherland, as well as social, religious, and political changes that had occurred since my parents' departure. Sandwiched in between these stories for both my parents and their Dutch friends came recollections of the *oorlog*, the war, something I understood as a terrible time for the Dutch at the hands of the Nazis. But as a child I failed to appreciate the significance of the physical and emotional hardships endured by my parents and their friends during those dreadful years. In my ritual childhood prayers I expressed gratitude for my daily safe-keeping and the plentitude of food on the table, but not until well into my adult years did I begin to fathom how the deprivations, fears, and losses, repeated over and over across the five-year duration of the war, affected my parents and their countrymen for the remainder of their lives. Overhearing such accounts in a language I didn't fully comprehend, I had little awareness of how war altered my parents as young people or what they could hope for and dream about. Nor did I realize at the time that the stories I heard so frequently from my parents and their friends would come to an end, that my parents and other post-war Dutch immigrants would age and die, that the descriptions of their travails – and toughness – during and after the *oorlog* would be lost if their offspring failed to tell successive generations of the determination, fortitude, and courage of their forebears.

I recognized, however, that despite the weekly reminders issued from the Sunday pulpit to forgive one another, my parents could never allow themselves to befriend anyone with a German background. My sisters and I learned to carefully couch any mention of someone with a German name or accent whom we met or worked alongside. I sighed more than once when Mom repeated her vehement stance, “You can never trust a German, never!” followed by my father’s murmured agreement, “*Ja*, that is true.”

My mother spoke to her children about her experiences during the war, the horrors as well as humorous anecdotes, about biking along unlit backroads after curfew to evade patrolling soldiers; riding bicycles with wheels wound with rags after the Germans made buying rubber tubes and tires an impossibility; of the copper lid she brought with her to Canada, a leftover memento of the kettle the Germans took after barging into her and her mother’s apartment; of the quarantine sign left on the front door well after my grandmother’s recovery from diphtheria, a way to forestall the Germans from entering their home. My father, on the other hand, otherwise so ebullient and talkative, said little about what he endured those awful years. That was the past, he’d say, reminding us always of the importance to look ahead to the future.

Some 25 years after his death, I described to a friend how during the war my father went into hiding, part of the Dutch resistance, wherein numerous Dutch men and women engaged in clandestine and underground activities, anything to thwart the Germans who began their occupation of The Netherlands in May of 1940. Referred to as *onderduikers*, literally ‘underdivers’, an estimated 330,000 men, women, and children sought safe refuge, among whom Anne Frank’s family in Amsterdam became the most famous. My father and his brother, after receiving their conscription to report for duty at a steel factory in Dresden, Germany, also became fugitives from the Nazis. As loyal Dutchmen, their notice to serve in Hitler’s war precipitated their “diving under,” to leave their home in Haarlem and locate themselves elsewhere with an assumed identity. My father, 20 years old when drafted in 1941, left his childhood home with forged papers identifying him as Tjeerd VanderMeer, his new surname reflecting his maternal grandmother’s maiden name. He hid with a farm family, the de Vrieses, who lived in northern Holland, in the province of Fryslân, a rural area from where his grandparents years before had migrated to the city in hopes of improving their economic situation. In returning to his ancestral home, my father strove to save his life.

“How traumatizing for him,” my friend said as I offered her these details. A chill crossed over me when she made her comment while at the same time something clicked. This comment captured so much of what I had never before put together as the full picture of my father’s peculiarities: his staunch religious zeal; his over-the-top anxiety in the face of unfamiliar circumstances; his un-

yielding conservative worldview; his nervous agitation, which on Sunday mornings had him run to the bathroom several times before leaving the house to attend the weekly worship service. Upon arrival at the church, he visited the men's room once more before seating himself in the family pew. Based on memories shared by my aunts about their oldest brother, the war almost certainly aggravated my father's pre-war idiosyncrasies. Until talking to my friend, aside from appreciating the difficulties of war with its unending shortages and the fear engendered by armed German soldiers milling about on cobblestoned town squares, I'm embarrassed to say how little thought I had given to my father's plight as an *onderduiker*. From my mother, I learned how my father slept in a small back room rigged with a rudimentary contraption involving a string, something the de Vries family pulled to alert him in his room should Nazi soldiers unexpectedly enter the house. Hoping to catch unawares any *onderduikers* and their hosts, the German militants could shoot everyone on sight, adults and children alike, a penalty paid by many in the resistance movement. More than once, my mother told me, my father escaped through the barn and leaped across the muck of farm fields to avoid the soldiers who stormed the house whenever they chose.

For unexplained reasons, perhaps to prevent undue notice with extra pants and shirts hanging on the clothes line, Mrs. de Vries chose not to launder my father's clothing. Instead, he periodically packed his soiled clothing into a suitcase and sent it home for his mother to wash. To do so, he sent word to his family letting them know when to meet the boat on which his luggage travelled. On one occasion, my father's sister arrived by train to retrieve her brother's case of laundry. En route, Dutch personnel in the employ of the Nazis stopped her.

"Papers, please." Assured my aunt carried legitimate identification, one of them, pointing to the baggage she carried, asked: "What have you here?"

"Only some clothes," my aunt replied, trying to sound nonchalant, praying they would not open the suitcase. But they did, and the stench of fermenting manure on my father's trousers had everyone backing up for fresh air. The uniformed Dutch men gave each other a meaningful look. The dirty clothing, a dead give-away of someone in hiding, could have ended my aunt's day in a very bad way. But the men, in their own act of resistance to sabotage their German oppressors, said nothing as they closed the valise, motioning her brusquely away while turning toward their next task. Shaken, my aunt breathed a huge sigh of relief as she boarded the train bound for the relative safety of home. My father's family would later learn how, in escaping a *razzia*, a German raid, their son and brother had run "like a jack rabbit" through cow and pig shit in the barnyard, across the back field to where he hid in the shrubs and tall grasses alongside a muddy canal.

An underdiver for so much of the war, how did my father endure and hold himself together for so long? With electricity that flickered and remained off more often than not, particularly in the last year of the war, and because of the evening blackout policy of the *Reich*, he could only read by daylight whatever books or newspapers were available to him. Not many people possessed a radio with which to listen to news or entertainment, for the Germans had confiscated such electronics at the onset of their occupation. Those who tuned in to the BBC via unsundered equipment did so as an act of defiance, albeit a risky one. Should the Nazis make a sudden visit with the intent of catching anyone with prohibited belongings, for example, family and friends gathered round a banned radio set, the consequences could be extreme. Reading the newspapers, some of them contraband and published by the resistance movement, and whiling away evenings with his host family and any trusted neighbors who dropped by to call, would doubtless have helped my father ease his situation. In this way he learned about advances and losses by enemy and allied forces as well as how others across the country fared. I can still hear the rowdy laughter of my father and his Dutch friends as they recalled covert adventures and close calls in which they had outsmarted the *Moffen*, a Dutch pejorative for the Germans. One man, with glee in his voice at the retelling, described how under the cover of darkness, he poured sugar into the gas tank of a parked *Third Reich* vehicle, then cycled like the wind, as far away as possible from the crime. Someone else intercepted and dumped batches of Nazi propaganda into a canal while another person distributed *verboden* newspapers published by the underground resistance movement. Forbidden as the Dutch were of any expression of patriotism, humming or singing their national anthem, *Het Wilhelmus*, (which, translated, includes the line, "Loyal to the fatherland I will remain until I die..."), became another act of rebellion. Recalling their escapades while gathered in our living room over cups of coffee, my father and his friends spoke only about the excitement of their capers, never their fears.

In addition to the shelter Dutch families provided their *onderduikers*, my father, like all his counterparts, depended upon other activists for his safety, including the counterfeit ration cards needed for his hosts to obtain the food necessary to feed an additional person. Although my father worked in the fields by day, moving about openly in his off time was out of the question; thus, as a devout Christian, he dared not attend church for the duration of the war. A carpenter by trade, he found he liked farm work. Growing things and tending animals suited him, and being outdoors helped him to release any cooped-up feelings stemming from long evenings indoors and monotonous Sundays, a day of rest. Unable to move about as young people ordinarily do, he must have had periods of sheer boredom, alone in his cramped room with little to do, the strain broken by the occasional comfort of a cigarette should he have some tobacco to roll. The year-

round physicality of farm life, what with feeding and milking cows, haying, plowing, seeding, and harvesting, it all must have left him blessedly tired at the end of each workday. Bored though he might periodically be, he could ill afford to become complacent; a chance encounter with an unknown sympathizer could cost him his life if reported to the German authorities. He must have wearied at times from inertia, only to go through the sudden adrenaline rush of a German *razzia*, always wondering when or if a raid might happen, running for his life at the least suggestion of danger, ever mindful of the overhead roar of aircraft, listening for air raid sirens, attuned to the descending whine of nearby and distant bombs then absorbing their booming vibrations, all of which must have left him habitually rattled.

Fathers are typically concerned for the wellbeing of their maturing daughters. But my father's repeated admonishments to my sisters and me to "Be careful! We live in a wicked city," struck us as extreme. Those forceful warnings may well have originated from his chronic fear and uncertainty during those years and from his knowledge of what happened to teen-aged girls at the hands of enemy soldiers, men who had lost their moral center.

My nephew, my father's only grandson, recalled an incident that cast further insight into the probable lasting imprint of the war on my father. As children, my nephew and his sister, staying for a sleepover with their grandparents, thought to play a trick on my father. Engrossed as he was in reading the newspaper while sitting in his easy chair, my nephew and niece sprang out from behind the furniture and whacked the newspaper in his hands, catching my father completely off guard. The trick backfired; instead of the good-natured laughter they had expected from their Opa who usually indulged their innocent mischief, he shot them a startled look, became uncharacteristically stern, and sent them directly to bed. Who knows what long-hidden feelings his grandchildren's prank unnerved? A concrete thinker not given to introspection, my father's long-suppressed fears may well have surfaced unexpectedly along with the forgotten vigilance that had been his daily companion for so many years.

Food and fuel supplies became progressively scarce as the war continued; by the last winter of the war, the lack of provisions dominated daily life and resulted in thousands of Dutch civilians perishing from starvation and cold. Intent on limiting their military losses in that lowland country, the Germans flooded crucial agricultural areas with sea water, which decreased the planting of crops and availability of food during 1944. The situation worsened when next the Germans halted the transportation of dwindling food supplies by boat. As a result, people in urban areas found their daily caloric intake reduced even more. The next Nazi edict prohibited the purchase of food from outlying farms and city dwellers found themselves in dire straits, scavenging for what little food they could during

that long cold *hongerwinter*. My father's family in Haarlem, like many of their fellow citizens, staved off hunger pangs by trying to make tulip bulbs palatable, something my father's sister remembered as "indescribably bitter." Those who lived in the countryside, like my mother, benefited from the storage of late fall garden vegetables such as potatoes, onions, and carrots – providing, of course, their German occupiers had not stolen such foodstuff. As their provisions diminished, however, country folk often found themselves eating the same thing day in, day out. Years later, my father, who reprimanded his children when they turned their nose up at "perfectly good food," told me in no uncertain terms to never again serve beets for Sunday dinner. I loved that colorful root vegetable, cooked, grated, served hot with sautéed onions, some butter stirred through, and sprinkled with salt and pepper to season. My father himself planted a row of beets every summer, so I could not understand why he reacted with such sharpness. That day he disclosed how he had eaten red beets almost every day of that hunger winter. Grateful at the time to go to bed with something in his belly, he could, after the war, content himself with beets as a midweek meal but not on Sunday, a sacred day he wanted left untainted by the taste of that dark time.

In November 2015, Stuart McLean of CBC's *Vinyl Cafe* read an essay submitted to the program in honour of Canada's Remembrance Day (Veterans Day in the U.S.). I listened as he read the words of a Jewish woman who as a child lived several years during the war with a Protestant family in The Netherlands. She commented how, by taking her in, a risky endeavor, the members of this family overcame their fear to stand up and resist evil, how they found the courage to act on their ideals. I couldn't help but think how my father, young as he was when the war began, held to his convictions to resist evil and overcome it with good, a Bible verse he quoted frequently when I grew up.

Because he said so very little about it, I can only guess with what terrors my father lived during and after the war. Born in Canada ten years after the war ended, I knew my father to be quirky by nature, rigid in his beliefs, frustrating in his patriarchal ways, and socially clumsy. But no mistake: he loved his wife and children, and, when they arrived, his grandchildren, too. In fact, he loved life, milking as much enjoyment as he could from every waking moment. So that photo, in which my father raises his glass with such exuberance to share with friends and family in the happiness of his daughter and her fiancé signifies to me that although evil as perpetrated by war exists, it cannot endure, that in the words of Proverbs, weeping may last for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. And that is how my father greeted each day and lived his life, with immense joy, his antidote to what he referred to as "the wicked ways of the world." My hope is that, like my father, his grandchildren and great grandchildren will brace themselves with the fortitude and joy needed to reflect what is worthy and good.

About the author

Twenty years ago, Jenny Radsma moved south from northwestern Alberta to live in northern Maine where meeting people with a Dutch accent is a rarity. The daughter of immigrant parents (her father from Haarlem, her mother from Lemmer), who by needs ended their formal education midway through the eighth grade, Jenny made her parents proud by becoming “Dr.” Radsma. A professor of nursing by day, she writes when she can, mostly on weekends. She continues to take writing workshops and her work, primarily about the Dutch immigrant experience within her own family, has been published in *Goose River Anthology*, *Echoes*, and *The Sun*. Her essay “What’s in a cup of coffee?” was published in *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies / Revue canadienne d’études néerlandaises* 37.1. When Jenny is not teaching, reading, or writing, she bikes, hikes, cross country skis, or snowshoes, depending on the weather. She still has hopes of learning to speak fluent Dutch and Frisian.

Author’s contact: radsma@maine.edu.