

Chapter 3. Home and Family Life

I have asked myself what I really remember from the early years of my life. Are the things I know things that I actually remember or are they stories I have heard from my parents or other family members along the way? My memory does not go back nearly as far as that of the man who a number of years ago told me that he could remember things from when he was two years old!



Bertha and Bill in 1934

According to one story I was told, for example, I climbed out of my crib (how could I remember that anyway?) and then out through an open window in my parents' bedroom on the second floor, to sit in or on a narrow planter box outside the window, probably no more than 20 or 25 cm wide. A farmer who was working in the field across the road from our house saw me and came to tell my mother about it. I assume that they got me back in through the same window I climbed out of, without harm to anyone except for the sense of panic that I might fall to the ground from my precarious perch.

I am told that I was very afraid of dogs, but I have no memory of that. Nor do I remember any of the family picture-taking sessions that must have been arranged from time to time, as witnessed by photographs we have from the 1930s.

Apparently grandfather van den Born came and stayed at our house for a week or so once in a while to do some repair work on the mill—things mechanical were not my dad's strong suit. Mother told us in 1980, "Our Bill was about two years old and Grandpa tried all the time to have him on his lap, but he would not do it. Too stubborn, I suppose."

Occasionally we would travel to Terschuur to visit our relatives there, and once we even went to Epe to visit *oom* Cees and *tante* Aal who had just had a baby. At least some of that travelling was done in the business truck because we never did have a car, but I have only vague memories of the trips. Bertha remembers making the trip more often when she was 6 to 10, and several times she stayed at the Nijboer farm for a number of weeks during the summer. She remembers riding her bike there

with Dad, or going by train, via Amersfoort and then to Terschuur, or even with Dad driving the truck.



George, Bertha, and Bill in 1936

From the time before I started school or of actually starting school I have no memories at all. Neither, for that matter, of many significant events during my elementary school days. I recall being told that Dad taught me to read (he probably taught me some arithmetic as well) and that, on account of knowing that, I started my elementary schooling in grade 2. According to my mother, however, “Dad

tried to teach Bertha to read and write, but she did not like it. Instead, Bill always hung around with these lessons and he picked it up real fast.” My age at the time I started school also may have played a role in the decision that I skip grade 1, because I was almost 7 when I started school in September 1939.

Near the end of my first school year, the country was turned upside down by war. World War II started with a bang when German troops invaded Holland on 10 May 1940. A number of months before that already, in the fall of 1939, while my parents were just two days into a short vacation trip to Belgium, the Dutch army was called into service, and Mother and Dad had to hurry home so Dad could report for duty. He was a *reserve kapitein* (reserve captain, with three silver stars on his uniform collar) and was stationed near Amersfoort. Dad was away from home a good part of the time that winter—I assume that one of the people who worked for him looked after the business when he was away. Mother had to look after the family by herself, with the help of a girl from the village who came every day. Mother again, “And then a whole army moved into Achterberg. There were a lot more soldiers than plain people.”

The main Dutch defense line (*de Grebbelinie*) was no more than a kilometer east of our house, really much too close for comfort. A day or two before the German tanks and troops actually reached that area, the government ordered everyone to leave. Dad was in the army, and Mother and her five children from 8 down to just under 2 made their way to Rhenen, on foot, carrying what little we could. We boarded a dirty coal barge that took us downstream on the Rhine towards Rotterdam where we were supposed to find shelter. Before we arrived there, however, German bombs flattened a good part of that city, and we were unloaded instead at Lekkerkerk, a dairy farm community in low pasturelands along the Rhine that were crisscrossed by ditches full of water. Somehow we were all housed and fed there for a week or ten days; when the German army had finished dealing its deathblows to the Dutch, we were allowed to go back, this time on a—to us—fancy tourist boat.



Bill, John J, John, Bertha, and George in 1939

Home was no longer the same as when we left it just a short time before. Spent rifle shells littered our yard, trenches had been dug in the front yard, part of an artillery shell had blasted a hole through the outside layer of the brick wall in the living room, and there was evidence that a Dutch soldier had died in the back room. I remember seeing his uniform jacket with a bullet hole through the back. He had left a written note that said: "I go to Jesus." We were informed later that he was buried in the Dutch military cemetery on the Grebbeberg, and I remember his parents from Dordrecht (near Rotterdam) coming to stay with us several times in later years to visit his grave. It was not a good time, and I continue to be amazed at how my mother was able to cope with it all, including not knowing where Dad was and how he had fared during the brief actual battles.

As it turned out, the Dutch government was forced to surrender to the Germans before the hostilities reached the place where Dad's unit was stationed, and he came home unscathed soon thereafter. I don't recall if school resumed immediately or if that was even possible with the extensive bomb damage that had been inflicted in Rhenen also. In any case, in September I was back in school, this



Bill and George at school

time in grade 3. Many of the Dutch army's cement bunkers and pillboxes among the trees and shrubs on the Grebbeberg hill were left intact just where they were—I was able to show some of them to our children during our family's first trip to Holland in 1970.

George and I and our two neighbourhood friends often would go and play in what we called *het zandgat* (the sand pit), a place not far from our house into the side of a sandy hill. Other times we would go climbing and looking around inside Dad's windmill or get in the way of the workers who were mixing or bagging feed. The mill was no longer used for grinding at all during the last years before the war—it had been replaced by an electric-powered hammermill. During the latter part of the war years, however, it came back into use for a time when electricity was in short supply. I loved to watch the slow-and-steady-turning vanes that drove the heavy mill stone, via an intricate arrangement of heavy wooden gears and shafts. The entire upper part of the mill could be turned in any direction to make sure the vanes caught as much wind as possible.

There were other experiences also that still play through my memory. One winter we had a lot of snow, with what to us were huge drifts in our backyard, the snow so firm that we could walk on top of the drifts without our feet sinking in. Another time there was so much freezing rain for a while that we actually went skating on the street in front of our house.

Based on some not so pleasant incidents that involved me, I sometimes wonder if I was perhaps accident-prone. It was either that or I simply did some dumb things. In one of those incidents I was coming back from Rhenen on my bike and turned the corner by the railroad crossing too close. My pedal caught on the post and I went down for the count. When I came to again I was sitting on the ground beside my unharmed bike, wondering where I was and what had happened.

Another time I decided to do a bit of wall-climbing on my own. I found some rope, tied it to a beam in the attic, and ran it out through the small attic window down to the balcony on the back part of the house. I grabbed the rope and started to 'walk' my way up the outside wall, and the next thing I knew I was lying in my bed while my mother and some neighbours were standing around watching me with looks of concern on their faces. It seems that my knot-tying was not up to code and I had come crashing down, knocked out cold with a concussion. Some undoubtedly would claim that I was never the same after that.

Then there was the time I found a straight razor along the road near our house, and promptly managed to get a deep cut in my leg. There was a good deal of bleeding, of course, but I think I told no one about my adventure, and eventually it healed again. I still have the scar. Another time I was climbing on a big log by the local small sawmill, slipped, and tore a hole in my leg on a nail. Again I told no one, but the following week it became infected, to the point where I was limping, and my host parents in Arnhem made me go to a doctor to clean it out and allow it to heal. I still have that scar also.

I liked reading, including reading in bed—we had to go to bed early enough to make that attractive. But lighting was a problem because keeping the room light on was not an acceptable option. I got hold of the necessary wiring and a switch (actually

unscrewed and stolen out of the back of an old bus I rode part of the way to and from high school for a time) and proceeded to install a reading light that I could turn off quickly when I heard Dad come home on the gravel beside the house. In the process of installing the system I suddenly had this 220-volt electric jolt up my arm when I touched a live wire. Scary times but no permanent harm done, fortunately.

With minor exceptions, we always walked as a family to and from the *Gereformeerde Kerk* in Rhenen, twice each Sunday. Most of the people had their own assigned seats there. Our family had four such seats during most of the time I remember, in the second row from the back in the small sanctuary. Dad was in the church council most of the time, it seemed, and, since the council brethren had their own seats up front, it worked fairly well for us, as long as we did not attend with the whole family. When I was older, some of us sometimes would get to sit on the balcony, something that had its own attraction of relative 'freedom'. At some point I also was considered old enough, probably around 15, to stand during the 'long' prayer, as was the custom for the men in our congregation.

When Dad served as elder he negotiated his way out of doing family visiting by volunteering to read a sermon whenever that was necessary in the absence of a minister. During the 1930s that happened quite often apparently, because for a time the congregation was too small to support a full-time minister.



Willem and Gijsje van den Born's 40th wedding anniversary in 1942

Significant family events I remember from the 1940-45 war period include, first of all, the fortieth wedding anniversary of my van den Born grandparents in 1942. Our whole family made its way to Terschuur for the big celebration. Neither of my grandparents was in great physical shape anymore but, judging from family photographs, they were able to enjoy the festivities.

My grandfather died soon thereafter, on 14 June 1943, age 70. Some time before his death, probably in 1942 around my tenth birthday, he called me into his living room during a visit there and presented me with his silver pocket watch and a big wallet, presumably because I was his oldest grandson and was named after him. I never found much use for the large wallet and it disappeared at some point. I still have the watch but does not run anymore; according to a watch repairman to whom I took it during the sixties, it was not a particularly good watch. Nevertheless, it still has sentimental value for me.

My grandmother died the following year, on 21 December 1944 (age 70). She had suffered a stroke in 1935 and had spent the next nine years confined to bed. According to Peter, his father—*oom* Jan—had become very attached to her and had visited her every morning during all those years to talk about how the business was going. My grandmother's body was the first dead person I had seen and that was a bit of a shock for a 12-year-old with very little life experience and no death experience at all until then. On a cold winter day many of us walked behind a horse-drawn carriage for her burial in the cemetery some distance east of Zwartebroek.

My Nijboer grandparents (*Opa* and *Oma*) died 2 January 1937 (*Opa*, age 76) and 10 December 1945 (*Oma*, age 80). I was four years old when *Opa* Nijboer died and I have no memory of him at all. I do have a picture of *Oma* Nijboer in my head, and I also have some recollection of the *bedstee* where she slept (a sort of bed-closet in the wall). I do not recall going to her funeral and, perhaps surprising, I also do not recall seeing my parents grieving after any of my grandparents' deaths. Perhaps that was a more private part of their lives.

In April 1943, just before Jack was born, there were worrisome rumours of the possibility that ex-officers in the Dutch army would be imprisoned by the Germans, and Dad was one such ex-officer—he had served as captain. Jack was born on a Saturday and Dad saw to it that he was baptized the very next day so he could be sure to be around for it himself. Dad was a strong believer in the need to have children baptized just as soon as it could possibly be done (*vroegdoop*, early baptism)—to him that was more important than to have Mother participate in the celebration of God's covenant promises and the parental promises that go with it. Mother was not able to be present at Jack's baptism—not a surprise, of course. In fact, I am quite certain that Mother did not witness the baptisms of any of her children.

Earlier during the war period, Dad decided to raise a bunch of rabbits, even purebred types that could be taken to a rabbit show. Their main purpose was to serve as food for the family, and we ate a lot of them during those years. George and I were charged with collecting dandelion leaves to feed to the rabbits during part of the year, a rather uninspiring pastime at best. We did like the rabbit meat, though; I remember its taste as being very much like that of chicken. Mother canned quite a bit of the meat also, and we ate that during our evacuation stay in Terschuur through the winter of 1944-45. The canned stuff did not taste good, though. Neither did the goat milk we drank for the better part of two years. It was said to be good for us but none of us liked it. The goat was kept in a small shed in our backyard that also housed a pig during a couple of the war years. The goat provided milk and the

pig was duly butchered when it had reached the right size. One memory is that of taking our goat to a neighbour in the village to be bred by the buck he had. I did not really understand the significance of what was going on, and no one bothered to enlighten me, but I do know that the buck's stable had a terrible smell.

There were more war experiences to come. In the fall of 1944, just after I had started my second year of high school in Arnhem—more about my school days in the next chapter—school suddenly ended, because the battle of Arnhem (Operation Market Garden, described in Cornelius Ryan's *A bridge too far*) was upon us. The coming of the glider and paratroop landings near Arnhem on a bright September Sunday must have been known to some in the Dutch resistance movement, including my father. In any case, on the Saturday before the landings took place, my dad rode a heavy-duty bicycle with a carrier over the front wheel (*transportfiets*) to Oosterbeek, picked me up, with whatever few belongings I had there, and took me home, a distance of about 15 kilometers. He clearly knew something that I didn't at the time. One of the bits I remember about the trip is that we had to walk up the long hill on the east side of Wageningen, about halfway home. I suspect that it was a lot of hard work for my dad to pedal that heavy bike both ways, with a nearly 12-year-old as a passenger on the trip home—admittedly lightweight—especially since he was not at all used to heavy physical work.

The next day was Sunday 17 September, and I clearly remember standing in the front yard of our house in the afternoon, watching allied fighter planes and bombers flying directly overhead, followed by planes that towed gliders and planes that disgorged large numbers of parachutists. Operation Market Garden was intended to secure the Rhine bridge at Arnhem so the allied troops coming from the south could cross the river there. The landing area was more than 15 kilometers east of us, but we could see everything that happened in the clear-blue sky, including seeing planes shot down and watching parachutists being shot at. My parents almost certainly thought that the end of the war was in sight at that point, but I have no recollection of such thoughts myself. I was impressed by what I saw, of course, but I had no real sense of the importance of it.

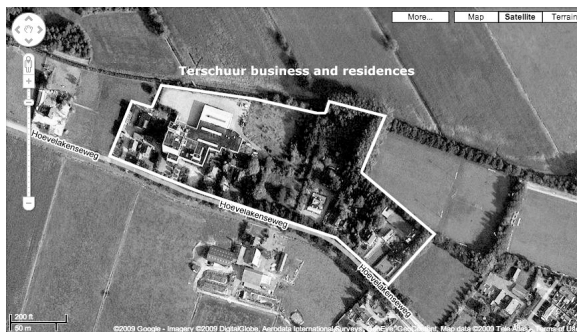
During the next few weeks we dug a big a hole in a dead corner behind the house and buried much of our canned food and some of our possessions there, on the premise that soon we might be ordered to leave. Unfortunately, most of it was stolen or destroyed during the time we were gone. We also had dug a hole under the cement floor of a chicken house in the backyard and stashed a bunch of stuff in there, including bicycle tires and some truck tires from the business. Most of that also had vanished when we returned home in 1945. Bertha remembers still another small hiding place, inside the house, under the floor of the second-floor guest room. I remember it also, including access to it through the closet floor. It probably was used only for bits of contraband material from time to time.

In late October 1944, when the Allies had come north as far as the Rhine, the evacuation order from the German forces came and everyone was instructed to leave our village and the neighbouring towns along the north side of the Rhine, within 48 hours. The order must have been expected, because all the arrangements

as to where we were going to live seemed to be in place. Most other people also seemed to have a plan in place for their departure.

Off we went to Terschuur, in a Jewish-exodus-like procession of five families. The trip itself, with horses and wagons and with bicycles for some of the kids to ride, was not particularly memorable and there were no serious complications. The business truck, equipped with a wood-fired gas generator because there was no gasoline to run it, probably went along as well. Three of the four additional families that went with us were employees in my dad's business: the Van Laars and two Rijkse families, Jan and Jurrie and their respective wives and children. The fourth family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Stienstra who, in fact, stayed with us in the same house in Terschuur. They were members of the church we attended who had moved to Achterberg after the husband retired from the police force in Rotterdam.

Mother was suffering from an infection in her arm and could not pack for the move, so Mrs. Stienstra and Bertha did most of it. Mother went ahead a day early, to Gijs van den Broek, a customer-friend of Dad's who lived about halfway to Terschuur. She probably took 18-month-old Jack along—we picked them up the next day.



Terschuur business and two residences in 2009

So began an 8-month sojourn in Terschuur. The place was not strange to my parents, of course, because both of them had grown up there or nearby. Two of my father's brothers operated the grain and feed business that my grandfather had built up in Terschuur; they had good connections with the farmers in the area, so we were not likely to run short of food. As children, we never went hungry during that period,

contrary to many people in the cities. Local farmers and relatives kept us well supplied with food.

The houses we lived in were along a main road and near a railroad track. Two of the houses belonged to my uncles and aunts who had vacated them, and two additional ones that belonged to their hired help also were available. All the occupants of these houses had moved in with other relatives or helpful farmers 1 or 2 kilometers away from the danger zone where allied fighters and bombers could wreak havoc on German trains or trucks. I don't know if my parents and the members of the other four families worried about that, but I do know that I did not.

The Stienstras did quite a bit of work in helping with household chores in our house in Terschuur. They were good people, and I can still picture them clearly in my mind. Mr. Stienstra was a soft-spoken, gentle, old-looking, and totally bald man. Sometimes he and *oom* Cees van't Land, who was living nearby, would play the violin together, but neither of them, unfortunately, was a very accomplished player. *Oom* Cees slept in a chicken coop on the property because he was involved in local resistance activities and was hiding from the Germans. At other times, Mr. Stienstra and *oom* Jaap and Dad would get into a series of chess games to help fill the time.

We sometimes watched them play, under strict instruction from Dad not to offer any helpful comments to any of the players. For Bertha and me, Dad organized organ lessons from someone in Amersfoort who came to the house for that purpose on a regular basis. Bertha was good at it; for me it supplemented a brief period of piano lessons I had the winter before when I was boarding in Oosterbeek.

Every once in a while we would witness aerial dogfights, and once an allied fighter flew down and shot at a German fuel tanker that had stopped on the street out front. We children were outside and were a bit concerned about that, of course, but, as per our standing instructions, we sought shelter behind a small brick building somewhere on the premises and away from the road. The truck was empty, fortunately, and did not explode or catch on fire even though some of the machine gun's bullets had gone right through the tank. The engine and machine gun sounds of allied fighters such as the Spitfires are still engraved on my solid state memory of those years.

On one of those days, Bertha and George were on their way to the *Dronkelaar* farm where our Nijboer relatives lived, when an allied fighter plane spotted a German army Volkswagen going down the same road and started shooting at it. They quickly rolled into the ditch and then ran into a farmyard and hid behind a hay stack. Afterwards they ran home, Bertha with holes in her stockings, about which she was very unhappy. The car was hit and the driver and passengers were at least wounded. Apart from the scare, however, Bertha and George escaped unhurt.

In a last-ditch effort by the German air force on New Year's Day 1945, waves of their planes flew over the place where we lived, on their way to England presumably. I clearly remember all the low-flying black-crossed planes and the noise from their engines. We did not see any returning planes and I don't know what their fate was but I assume that they accomplished very little.

There was no school for us during that winter, and we had to occupy our time in other ways. One of the things we had to do was make daily trips to the local dairy or to a nearby farm for milk. We spent time jumping across the *beek* (creek) behind the house, including falling in the water at least once. A few times we watched the secretive butchering of a pig. On Sundays we would walk to church in Zwarteboek, a little over a kilometer away. Several of us also attended catechism classes there on one of the weekdays. I don't remember being bored.

Electricity was scarce or perhaps non-existent for a while, and much of our lighting at night came from carbide-fueled lamps. Calcium carbide and water combine to generate a flammable gas (acetylene) that provides a quite bright light. The same raw materials also provided excitement on New Year's Eve. An old creamery can with a hole in the bottom was filled with some carbide and water, the lid was jammed on tight, and after a few minutes a match by the bottom hole set off an explosion that sent the lid flying.

During the latter part of the winter we saw a lot of food hunters and scroungers from the big cities further west. They came on foot, with baby carriages, or on bicycles with solid rubber or wooden tires, heading east to find food or west to go home again. Many of them stayed overnight in a hayloft above the old horse stables on the property. Mother would feed them soup made from ground low-grade peas that Dad