

The Story of Joseph Koek

I was born in The Hague, Netherlands, in 1930. My original name was Joseph Koekkoek. I was the middle child of a wonderful Jewish family. I had a mother and a father and two sisters who loved me. My mother, Katrien, was a manicurist and my father, Philip, was a custom tailor; both worked out of our small apartment. It was very rare for both parents to work in those days, but times were hard and my parents were determined to feed their young family.

I had a lovely early childhood.

After the Nazi invasion, May 5, 1940, everything changed.

My family did not discuss politics in front of their young children, so I had no idea what was happening in Europe until the war broke out and Rotterdam was bombed.

The fear didn't begin to come until later, when I was not allowed to go to regular stores anymore, owned by non-Jewish people, and

when I had to start wearing a yellow star, with the word “Jew” on it, and when curfew kept getting earlier and earlier until the family could barely go out of our house.

As a tailor, my father had to go to people’s houses often, in order to do “fittings” of the clothes they had commissioned him to make. He would throw his overcoat over his shoulder to cover his yellow star, so that he could leave the house. But things continued to get more and more uncomfortable.

On August 18th, 1942, my family received a letter ordering us to report to a train station, to be transported to a work camp. Later, as an adult, I came to realize that my parents must have been laying plans for an escape for a very long time, unbeknownst to my sisters and me, because the next day, I am leaving home with a “Resistance” guide. She is a total stranger, but we talk as she takes me to the end of the street, about three homes from our home. We turn right and keep on walking until we get to the home where I will spend the next few months, in hiding.

Being only 12 years old, I have no idea what to expect, or what is going on.

Looking back, now that I am in my 80's, I am wondering what must have been going on in my mind, and---more than that---what my parents must have been thinking. I wished that I could have dealt with our goodbye better. For years after the war, I punished myself for not dealing with our parting better.

My parents hand over their three children they love to strangers, who they must trust. None of us know what the future holds for us.

We never see our parents again.

We live in a three story home. The first floor is a class room, the second floor is where the family who hides us lives, and the third floor is where my sisters, a few other children and I are hiding.

We get up early in the morning to go downstairs for breakfast. After breakfast, we go upstairs, where we hide for the rest of the day.

We had to be quiet and couldn't wear shoes or flush the bathroom toilet.

We were strongly discouraged from even looking out the window. The roof had eaves, so it was unlikely that anyone looking up would have been able to see us, even if we stood at the windows, but it was too great a chance to take, so we mostly kept away from the windows, keeping ourselves further isolated from the outside world. I played cards and Monopoly and learned to keep my voice low.

My big sister, Eva, taught me how to knit at one point and that helped keep me occupied a little bit.

Later on, we will go downstairs and eat a warm dinner. I do not remember what we were fed but, since we are in the beginning of the war, I doubt that the meals were great.

Soon I was separated from my two sisters also. An escort from the Resistance brought me to the train station and we boarded a train

together. During the course of this very long trip, I changed trains a number of times. Every time that we changed trains, my escorts changed. None of these escorts knew one another. They identified each other through secret signals or code words. That way, if one of the Resistance fighters had been captured, they could not have given away the names of all the other fighters or the children they were transporting. By the time I reached the end of the line, far out in the countryside, my original escort had no idea where I had gone or what my new name was.

Initially, I was brought to live on a farm. The farmer and his wife helped me to establish a brand new identity. Because food became very scarce in all the big cities, during the war, it was not uncommon for a family to send their children to the country to live with distant relatives. So my hosts told all of their neighbors that I was just such a child, sent by their far-away family to be safe and have some good food and live a better life until things went back to normal in the big cities, when the war would be over.

I learned how to be a child-farmer and went to school and went to church and wore wooden shoes every day. The farmer and his wife were wonderful to me. I learned how to milk a cow, look for eggs, and mow the lawn.

One day, during the harvest season of 1943, I was bringing a load of peas we had just harvested to the market. I was transporting the peas with a horse and a wagon. As I was walking beside the wagon, my wooden shoe caught in one of the wagon wheels and I tripped and fell, breaking my leg. I was brought to the hospital and spent the next six weeks in the children's ward of the hospital. During my stay at the hospital, I became aware that there was at least one other "hidden child" in my ward---a young girl.

On the second or third day after I had arrived at the hospital, the Nazis had a "round-up".

They marched into the village where I had been staying. For a tiny village, they were sheltering a very large number of Jews and

other escapees. Every single person who was hiding and every single person who was sheltering them was taken to the front of the farm or house, and shot on the spot.

If I had not tripped and broken my leg, I would have been killed also.

After my leg healed, I was taken to an interim hiding place. Soon afterwards, I was brought to live in Friesland, a province in the North of the Netherlands. I ended up in a place called Oosterzee.

My new hosts were kind people. The father was the director of a dairy factory. He and his wife had two sons; one was a married adult and one was my age. Once again, I attended school, in a two-room schoolhouse with two teachers, and I even attended High School for a while.

During these years, I had no contact with my sisters and parents, and began to think about them and worry about them a lot. It had already been about three years that I had been living as

a “hidden child”. I began to wonder if my sisters and parents were okay.

On June 6th, 1944, I heard a broadcast on the BBC that announced that the Allies were invading France.

The winter of 1944-1945 was extremely difficult for the Dutch. Thankfully, I never went hungry, but I heard about how desperate and hungry the general population was from all the people who came to the dairy factory asking for food.

The Liberation of the Netherlands seemed to happen very slowly. The Allies didn't come straight to the town I was staying in---they had to come the long way around.

In May of 1945, the Nazis capitulated and the Dutch were finally free.

On the day that the Nazis had invaded Holland, my host family had gone to their dairy factory and made a special cheese that they promised not to eat until they were free once

again. So, on the day that the war ended, my host family and I cut up the five-year-old cheese and celebrated the end of the war with cheese and crackers. Old cheese tastes great!

Shortly after this, I began to wonder what was next for me. I was only 15 years old and I didn't know where I would go or what I would do with the rest of my life.

The family that had sheltered me had been wonderful to me---I called the adults "uncle" and "aunt" and they were very, very fond of me, too. However, with great love and kindness, they told me that they would *not* be adopting me---even if I *couldn't* find my real parents. They explained that, because the Jewish people had lost so very much, they wanted me to be true to my heritage and live a Jewish life. They handled this difficult situation with great sensitivity and I left the family with nothing but good feelings toward them.

At this point in time, many groups, including some Jewish groups and the Red Cross, were trying desperately to find the "hidden children"

and unite them with their families. Somehow, they found the three of us.

We later discovered that our family lost about 100 relatives during the Holocaust.

We lived in the Jewish orphanage for many years, from the time I was 15 until I was 21. It was during those five or six years that I learned what had happened to my parents. I got a letter telling me that they had perished at Auschwitz. But even that letter was very vague and, for many years, it was very hard for me not to know what had really happened to them.

I never had any “closure”.

I never got to say goodbye to my parents.

...As I am writing this, it is the middle of the night, in 2012, and I cannot fall asleep. I am thinking of my parents...

Where are they? It is the last days of their lives. They are probably not together. I have no idea how much they must suffer.

At the present time (2012) I still miss them. And so I cannot fall asleep.

Crazy? Not really.

I wish that I knew more about all they did to save our lives. I wonder why I am still living and able to tell this story and share my feelings with you.

As you can see, I have so many conflicting thoughts and feelings. I wonder if they even make sense... Is it all right for me---at this late date---to say "Thank you" to my parents for all that they have done for me?

Of course it is.

...I am 12 years old and I walk out of the house with a Resistance helper and I never look back...

Now I wish that I had turned around and waved goodbye. But maybe that would have been dangerous.

I often think of my parents. I have out-lived them by many years.

I am going to sleep now, I hope.

Is it proper to wish my parents “Rest in Peace”? I hope so.

I loved them more than they ever knew. *I still do!*