

# Is tomorrow your birthday?

## *A Story of the War Years as Remembered by Sjirk de Boer*

Story and Illustrations by Sjirk de Boer

Translation: Frank Johans de Boer



Sept. 2004 – Sjirk and Jannie

**Note about the author:** Omke (uncle) Sjirk Johans de Boer, married to aunt Jannie, was born in 1927 in Oosthem. He has had a long career in education. He has a vast general knowledge, he is a good storyteller and listener; to put it briefly, a real Atsma-de Boer. He also has kept a lot of old 'relics' of pake and beppe. He has written down part of the family-history. It is a story from the Second World War; he lived through it himself. In the story he describes the de Boer-family, with pake and beppe as leading characters.

### **How it started**

Only a few people know this story. The Locher family and our family will remember it. My brother Herre and I have told the story to some of the classes we had in our years as teachers. In Canada, my brother Frank has told it to groups and packs of the boy scouts, when he was a leader in that organization. Otherwise it's unknown. Let us try not to forget it. In the deBoer family home it happened. This is a story about making difficult decisions, about acts of hate and daring acts of compassion. It happened around fifty years ago and exact dates may be forgotten, some events may not be remembered in the right sequence. Fifty years later I am starting to write the story. I am writing this for the memory of our brave parents, for our children and grandchildren, our grandchildren's friends and for future generations. Let it not yet be forgotten.

On Friday, May 10 1940, the German invaded Holland. At that time most people in our small city of Sneek (pronounce snake), believed that the German forces would be beaten back by the Dutch army. This didn't happen. The next day German armoured vehicles stopped in our street, right in front of our house.



We had just finished our Saturday noon dinner and I clearly remember the dessert. Rice pudding with raisins, sprinkled with sugar and with melted butter. Normally we finished dinner with a bowl of buttermilk-barley-porridge.

Mother stood in front of a window in our living room when the Germans stopped. She turned around and promised us that we would have rice pudding for dessert on the day the Germans left. Mother kept her promise.

Even when food became very scarce during the five war years, mother saved some rice. On April 15, 1945, Canadian tanks stopped in front of our house, in exactly the same spot where the Germans stood in 1940. The next day mother served rice pudding for dessert. We did not get as much as in 1940 and without raisins, sugar or melted butter. There was another promise kept when the Canadian army arrived. The curtains hanging in front of the living room windows opened again. Mother had closed them when the German army vehicles stood in front of our house in 1940. "They," she said, pointing at the German soldiers "do not have to know what happens in our home".

After the Germans took control of the government, things started to change in Holland. In the next street, two blocks down, lived Mr. Pino. He had a corner store where you bought candies, chocolates, cigarettes, and similar items. The Pino store closed on Saturdays, not on Sundays. Most stores closed on Sundays. If needed people could buy cigarettes, or bread on Sundays at Pino's. Saturday was Sabbath and that's why the store closed on that day. The Pino family were Jews. When the German army had been in Sneek for a few weeks, a small group of soldiers walked past the Pino corner store. One of the soldiers noticed that Mr. Pino was a Jew and he shouted: "Ein Jude, ein Jude und der Jude hat ein Geschäft" (A Jew, a Jew and that Jew has a store). He pulled a hand grenade from his boot, one with a long wooden handle, and was going to throw this through the store window. The other soldiers stopped him. The soldier's action really shocked the town; for days it was talked about and it threw a real scare on the people.

In Sneek lived Jewish families who had left Hitler's Germany a few years ago. My sister had worked for some of them as a seamstress; they did not talk much, but a few things had been mentioned. We had heard some of the stories how the Germans disliked Jews. The hand grenade incident was the first experience for Sneek, and it showed a lot more than only dislike.

### **Now the story**

The Locher family lived in Amsterdam. They were Jews.

Abraham and Sarah Locher and three children. Esther was the oldest, followed by two boys, Jacob and Louis. Louis was the youngest. Looky, they called him.



Mr. Locher owned a fish store on a busy street. The Locher family home was a few streets away; they lived upstairs. With his delivery truck, very early each morning, Mr. Locher drove to IJmuiden, a small harbour town on the North Sea. Here he bought fish directly from the fishermen when they docked with their overnight catch. He trucked the fish to his store in Amsterdam. The couple worked the whole day in the store, sorting and cleaning fish. Their clients always got fresh fish, and the store was busy. The family enjoyed a good income from their business.

Mrs. Locher did not get much time to do any work at home. They had hired a housekeeper for all the things that, fifty years ago normally a housewife and mother would do. Mrs. Locher liked it better this way; cooking, cleaning and doing the laundry, were not her strong points.

A major change happened when the Lochers received an official document from the German controlled government. This document informed them that they could no longer keep their store, or even work in it. The German authorities took the store away and gave it to a collaborator.

The Lochers did not receive anything in return for their store. According to the Germans, not any Jew was fit to run a business and no Jew deserved compensation for confiscated property either.

Life for Jews got harder and harder. Many more rules and restrictions came. A yellow star had to be worn on all outer clothing. It had to be clearly visible and of a certain size. Everybody over a certain age had to have an Identification Card. This ID card showed a photo, fingerprints, address, name, etc., of the bearer. Cards issued to Jews came with a big J printed on it. No longer could Jews go to any public place. Coffee shops, restaurants, playgrounds, parks, swimming pools, buses, trains, trams, were out of bounds to Jews. Shopping was limited to a few hours and only on selected days. Jewish children were not allowed to go to their own schools. They were sent to special German controlled schools.

Slowly the situation got worse all across the country. Most foods were rationed. Any item normally imported or manufactured from imported raw materials became scarce or had completely disappeared from store shelves. For example, the racks and shelves for tires and inner tubes for bicycles, Holland's standard mode of transportation were empty. Even with the necessary coupons you could not buy any. Clothing was hard to get. You were lucky if you found a shoemaker who had leather left to resole your shoes. It helped if you had some bacon or butter to barter with. Some of the scarce items could be bought on the emerging black-markets, if you had the money.

Still, the general expectation was that Germany would soon start losing the battles against the Allied forces and that the occupation would come to an end. Resistance against German rule was hardly noticeable. Generally, their orders were followed. The people knew that German authorities expected total obedience. The population in Holland was made aware of German ruthlessness and the severity of their punishments. More and more the country started to find this out the hard way.

For Jewish citizens the situation was a lot worse. Little did they know what to expect next. Only a few people in Holland, Jew or not, had any idea of Germany's intentions.

During 1942, letters were sent to all Jews instructing them to appear, with hand luggage only, at certain locations. In the letter they were told that, after registration, they would be moved to camps in Germany to work in nearby factories. Men and women were needed for this work, children had to come along and could not be left behind.



A few Jews did not follow instructions and did not show up at their appointed time and location. They disappeared, "dove under," as the Dutch would say. Most of the Jewish "under-divers" got help from non-Jewish friends to stay out of German hands. The German- and the Dutch police hunted these fugitives. When caught, the Germans took them directly to Mauthausen. Similar treatment awaited people who helped Jews escape from the Germans and got caught doing it, Mauthausen was a camp built exclusively for punishment.

"Oh," Mr. Locher had remarked when they discussed the situation in the Jewish community in Amsterdam, "my wife and I are used to working hard. We don't mind long days. It may not be easy, but we will manage. We'll see what happens. Nobody knows for sure."

The Lochers also got the letter. It informed them to be at a well-known theatre, the "Hollandse Schouwburg," for registration. During the past few weeks some of the Lochers' friends and relatives had already left. Now it was officially their turn. Now they knew the date and time and that they could take only a small suitcase or handbag each.

The family knew about working in the German factories and how the city tram took everybody to Amsterdam's main train station, Central Station. From here a train left every night for Drente, one of the Dutch provinces bordering Germany. Close to the village of Westerbork there was a camp where the Jews would be temporarily housed. Later a train would come from Germany for them.

It was an early start for the whole family as they prepared for this journey; there were clothes to be selected and suitcases to be packed. Finally they were ready to go. A key was given to the neighbours, who had promised to look after their home during their absence.

The Lochers pulled the front door closed behind them.

During the walk to the theatre they met several acquaintances. The boys found friends from their old school, friends they had not seen for a long time. Esther also met several old girlfriends. One of the girls remarked that it looked as if they were going on a school trip, so many of the old friends together with only hand luggage.

A Dutch policeman stood in the doorway to the lobby of the theatre. They knew him well. For years he had been a regular customer in their store. The policeman walked over to Mr. Locher and took him aside. "Mr. Locher," he said, "listen to me, don't go inside, find an excuse and go back. Don't trust the Germans. There is a great danger. You will be killed if you go. Maybe, nobody will come back." Mr. Locher tried to walk away, shaking his head, but the policeman blocked his way and stood directly in front of him, whispering: "I will help you, my friends and I will help you to dive under and stay out of the German camps. I can give you ten minutes to make up your mind"

## **I can give you ten minutes to make up your mind!**

Mr. and Mrs. Locher had ten minutes to decide on their future. What course to take? What to believe, the letter they got, or the words from the policeman they knew as a customer? In the meantime their two Sons were playing outside with rediscovered friends and inside Esther also seemed to have a great time with her old friends. Occasionally you could hear Ester's voice clearly over the noise of the crowd.

Ten minutes later the eyes of the policeman and Mr. Locher met and he nodded slightly. Mrs. Locher had taken Esther aside. She whispered in her ear all they had heard from the policeman and told her about the decision the parents had made. "Esther, go outside, where your brothers are, leave your bag here," she urged her daughter. Esther's reaction was different: "Oh Mom, you are again scared for no reason at all. We girls have promised each other to stay together. What can happen? We'll see what kind of work we will have to do. We are leaving!" Esther left her mother and headed back to her circle of friends.

While Esther talked to her mother, her father went frantically through his pockets and wallet as if he was searching for something important. The policeman had been watching the family. He looked at the clock on the far wall and slightly nodded.

Mr. Locher went over to him. "Sir," he said, "I must have forgotten my letter; it has to be lying on the kitchen counter at home." The policeman shouted angrily, "Hurry up man, we don't have all day!"

The couple left the lobby, leaving their entire luggage behind. One more inquiring look at Esther, who shook her head.

This was the last the parents ever saw of Esther, laughing with her friends, and shaking no with her head.

Once outside, the Lochers called Jacob and Louis and told them to leave their suitcases lying with the luggage of their friends. The family, only four now, took a different route back. On the way home the parents told their sons about the changed plans.

Had it been a wise move? They had still time to go back to Esther. Should they return to the theatre and rejoin their daughter, instead of leaving her behind? These and a lot more questions raced through their minds But the Lochers stayed at home Waiting, ... just waiting.

Towards evening the doorbell rang. The policeman, now in civilian clothes, was standing outside. It felt like a relief when he took charge. He told the Lochers, "First thing to do is to remove all the yellow stars from your clothing. Secondly, make sure that with hard but careful brushing none of the holes made by sewing remain visible in the fabric. Next, put on as many layers of clothing as possible. Don't even consider a suitcase but take only a small handbag or purse. Bring with you as many as possible of your valuable items, like gold, silver, jewellery and of course money." It was not an easy order to follow when the policeman continued, "try not to look like fugitives and at the same time carry as much clothing and valuables as possible".

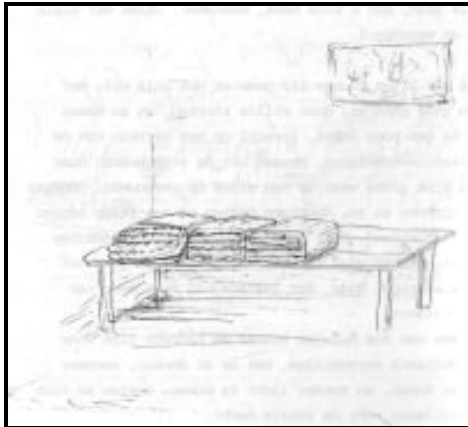
Outside it was nearly dark, when the front door closed again behind them. Their guide took the family through quiet streets for a long and slow walk. The last part had been in almost total darkness because the city was blacked out. Another German rule that allowed no street lights to burn, no traffic lights to operate. No light shone through windows of houses or stores either. Windows were covered with black paper, or had some other way to keep the inside light from escaping. Finally they reached their destination on the outskirts of the city. Here an area was set aside by the city for gardeners. You could lease a small plot of land to grow your own vegetables or flowers. Some people had leased the same plots for years and they had built shacks in their gardens for storage of garden tools and protection from rain and weather. In prewar years, during a spell of hot weather, you could always find gardeners spending the whole weekend at their gardens.

The Germans had outlawed this. You could still work in your garden during daytime hours, but could not spend the night in your shack. The Locher family was taken to one of these shacks by their guide. Here, in totally unfamiliar surroundings, they prepared for the first night away from home, wondering how Esther and her friends made out.

That same night a train left the Central Station for Westerbork. Esther was one of the passengers.

The Locher family did not sleep much, this first night away from home. They were city folk and had never before listened to rural night sounds. The noise of ducks in the nearby ditches, the barking of a farm dog in the distance, and the cry of the night heron kept them from a sound sleep. Or did their new worries keep the sleep away?

The Lochers had started their wait for the end of the war. They learned quickly that time seem to slow down when you are scared. No longer could they reverse their first steps as fugitives. If caught by the Germans, it would be a direct trip to Mauthausen. Wearing no yellow star was enough for that. Their friend, the policeman, had told them not to trust anybody, unless properly introduced. "Too many Dutch Nazis around", he said. "And don't forget the people who run to the Germans for the thirty bucks they pay to anyone who betrays Jews in hiding!"



The shack did not give much room for moving around; somebody was constantly in the way. The walls were just planking and far from being soundproof. There could be no loud conversation and absolutely no arguing. The Lochers knew nothing about the neighbours on the next plot! There were no beds in the shack and only one bench, a few boards hammered together. Bench is for Mom, the boys were told, and we men can sleep on the floor. They had enough blankets to stay warm overnight. There was no toilet, but behind a curtain was a pail with a lid. On a small counter stood another pail, this one had water in it and a ladle for scooping hung on the rim. An old kerosene burner stood beside this pail. It could be used for cooking or heating, but no kerosene had been available for at least a year.

Every day had one bright spot, a visitor. A woman, whose shack they stayed in, came to work for a while in her garden. She would go inside to stretch out and relax for an hour or so, when she got tired. At least, this is what she told the other gardeners. In her bag she carried the food and drink for the Lochers.

The underground, a name given to the combined actions of Dutch civilians against the German occupation forces, had made all the arrangements for the Lochers.

The underground informed the family that it had started the search for more permanent hiding places for them. It had also mentioned that it was better not to count on a place where the four could stay together. It did not take long for the underground to find suitable spots for the two boys. Jacob and Louis had to be ready one afternoon towards dusk and a guide would come to take them away. A school bag was all they could carry with them. Anything more would be too conspicuous.

After the departure of their sons, the Locher parents were alone in their garden shack for some weeks until fall when it became too cold to be comfortable. It was a cold day when a contact person from the underground came to tell the couple about possibilities. In the northern part of Holland, in the province of Friesland, they located several farmers who were willing to hide Jews. If the Lochers wanted, the underground could make the arrangements to get them there. For sure there would be more room and comfort at a farm than in a garden shack, they had to realize that the trip would not be without danger. The Lochers asked the underground to go ahead and start the plans for the move. What other choice was there?

Several problems had to be solved first and a major one was transportation. All the gasoline and diesel fuel available for buses and cars had been consumed. Coal came from Limburg, one of the southern provinces of Holland and was still available in limited quantities. With that coal the train was the only way to travel any distance.

The Lochers would get new ID cards with real photos and fingerprints, fake names and addresses and without the letter J this time. Train tickets would be bought for them so they would not have to stand in line at the station and risk being recognized and taken by German police. The underground would look after all arrangements. Everything had to be done with extreme caution.

The couple got a note with the details. They had to learn their new names and birth dates, their new address and the address of the fake family in Friesland they were supposedly going to visit. It also informed them about the trip. All of this and how to recognize their new underground contact had to be known by heart.

First they had to take the train to Zwolle, and there transfer to the one for Leeuwarden, the provincial capital of Friesland. Heerenveen was the next stop. Here the Locher couple was to walk from the train station to the tram station next door and take the tram for Harlingen. They read that this tram was not like an Amsterdam city tram, but more like a train on a smaller scale. The tram tickets even looked a lot like the train tickets. Their final stop would be at the tram station in the city of Sneek. In Sneek the couple would meet the next underground contact. The Lochers learned all this by heart, rehearsing it again and again. They had to because in Zwolle the German police routinely checked the ID cards of all the passengers on the train and the Lochers could not afford to mix up any answers. When they were sure that they knew everything, the note had to be totally destroyed.

### **The couple went on this dangerous journey**

In Zwolle, the German police did get on the train. The Lochers were scared; a fear shared by all the other passengers in the compartment. They thought that the police spent extra time on their ID cards. Mrs. Locher kept her eyes\* down, but Mr. Locher had returned the German's stare. Finally he had held his hand out and the police returned his ID. Not a single word was spoken. A very scary moment has passed.

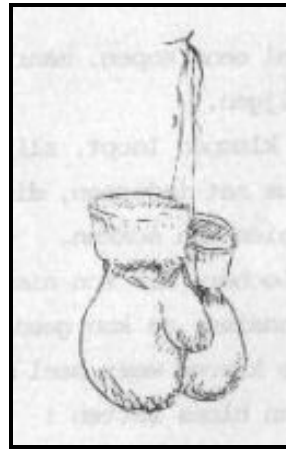
Finding the tram in Heerenveen was no problem. The people in their compartment on the tram had looked at them, but had left the couple alone. Nobody had talked to them or asked any questions. There was something strange though, with their fellow passengers. The Lochers found that they could not understand them! It sounded as if these people, in Holland, talked a different language.

The tram stopped in a village called Joure. Some passengers got off and a few more got on. About fifteen minutes later the tram entered a city and the tracks ran between a canal and a street. At a bridge the tram stopped. The couple was in doubt if this was the final destination and then remembered that their instructions had clearly mentioned a station and the Lochers stayed on. Only a few minutes later the tram stopped again. Here a sign told them that this was indeed Sneek. A nearby building looked like a station and the Lochers got their luggage out of the overhead rack and stepped down on the platform. It was late afternoon, almost dark. The other passengers disappeared quickly. The couple waited on the platform. What would happen next?

## B19

A man walked over to them and asked, "How was the trip". After a few moments of silence they remembered all that they had learned by hear from the destroyed note. "A pretty good trip, except we only got two sandwiches to eat and we are getting hungry." "Supper is waiting", was the reply of the new guide. He advised the Lochers to act as if they knew their way and not to look around too much. The new contact was not a big man and appeared to be well into his fifties. Much later would they find out that the underground knew him as B19.

Without more delay they started walking. They crossed a railroad and kept on through a rather wide street. The guide stopped at the next bridge. He looked around casually, retied his shoelace and when everything appeared quiet the three walked on to the next street. They walked past a blacksmith shop and a butcher store and entered the third building. It was a paint shop, not a large one, with some cans of paint and brushes on the shelves. Some plate glass was kept in a corner.

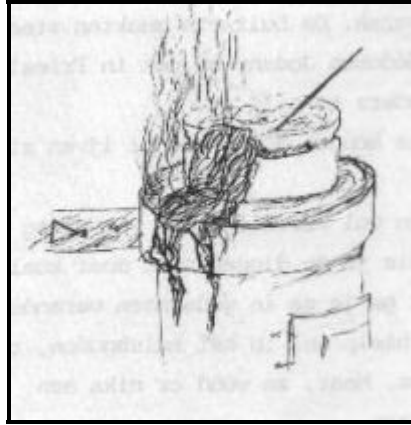


A sliding door took them to a small hall at the foot of a flight of stairs. Here the guide introduced himself, he told the Lochers that his family lived upstairs and that, for the time being, they would be his guests. He was thankful that they had arrived safely and hoped that also their stay at his place would be safe. He told the couple that the search for a more suitable place at one of the nearby farms would continue. Upstairs the Lochers were introduced to the deBoer family, Mrs. deBoer and the children. The family had eight children, but not all the names had to be remembered; some of the eight had moved out.

Next they were shown around the house, which was narrow, but rather deep. The couple's room was at the back of the house. Its windows looked out on a yard and warehouses. One of the windows swung open and you could step out onto a small balcony. The balcony could be used for a breath of fresh air only after dark. Nobody should see them. The Lochers noted with pleasure the burning stove in the room. Against one wall was a foldaway bed. There was no separate bathroom.

The next day more of the daily routines were discussed. It was decided that it was easier and more sociable to have mealtimes together in the front living room. If the doorbell would ring during a meal the Lochers would pick up their plates, spoons and forks and would go to their own room. The deBoer boys would place the unused chairs back against the wall. It was custom in the forties, to have empty chairs lined up at the wall and not around the table.





And the days changed into weeks, the weeks into months and the months into seasons. Winter came and went, so did spring and summer. Again fall was coming.

An endless row of identical days had gone by. Except for the moments after dark on the little balcony, the Lochers had always been inside. They could not go out and walk around in the city. With their dark complexion they were too conspicuous. There was not much traveling anymore and hardly a stranger could be found in Sneek. In prewar times it was a well-known water sport centre in Holland. Just having a dark complexion in a city of seventeen thousand predominantly blond people could start unwanted and dangerous questions. Even the ID without the J printed on it would not be sufficient. They would be unable to hide their lack of knowledge of the local language, and of the unique city dialect. The Germans were constantly intensifying the hunt for Jews and members of the underground organization.

This closed-in existence began to take its toll on the Locher couple. Mr. Locher appeared to be able to handle the stress rather well. He did pushups, gymnastics and all kind of things with the deBoer boys. The boys had discovered that in his younger days, he had been an active boxer. With gloves borrowed from the local boxing club, many an hour was spent sparring. Nobody ever got hurt. Mr. Locher knew how to control his strength. Man, he was strong! To give an example, using one arm he could lift his wife onto a kitchen table while she was sitting on a kitchen chair. Mrs. Locher was not a skinny woman. Another example, hanging from his outstretched arms my brother and I would do chin-ups. We were about thirteen and fifteen at that time.

Mrs. Locher did not find it as easy to adjust. Her days were empty. She had tried on occasion to take part in the normal housekeeping duties, but was not able to get the hang of it. She did not like it and could not pretend either. A disaster with rye flour porridge, which did not get the necessary stirring, ended her cooking debut. For days the smell of the brown burnt mess on top of the stove lingered in the house.

During the long evening hours, mother would knit. Socks and other clothing were needed and the stores were empty. The deBoer sons did a decent job of darning their own socks, but socks do wear out. The old treadle sewing machine was busy fixing old pants and blouses, which otherwise would be discarded Mrs. Locher could not do any of this. It was as if an invisible barrier around her got higher and denser day after day. She started to have crying spells. For no reason at all she would cry, we children thought. She did not want to be comforted either. Her husband found it sometimes impossible to make contact. All what she really wanted, was to be unhappy, we thought.

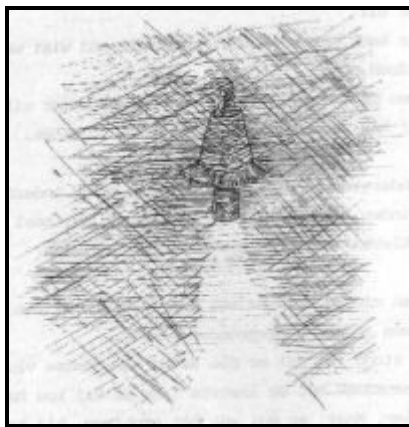
Understandably there were several reasons for her to be unhappy. Shortly it would be Jacob's fourteenth birthday. Where were Jacob and Louis? Where was Esther? Mrs. Locher would cry about all these unanswered questions. She started to blame her unhappiness on her husband because he was not as unhappy as she was. She would cry and cry and then leave the living room, shortly later followed by her husband. Nobody knew what to do. Soon there were no more rounds of boxing, no more games of strength or skill.

The underground tried to find another address. The Lochers present place, however, seemed to be safe and a lot of fugitives were in worse conditions. The German police had not stopped their hunt and moving them would be more dangerous. So the Lochers stayed at the home of B19.

It turned out to be a very special afternoon when B19 received a request from a fellow underground worker. It was about a young Jewish boy, who was being relocated by the underground. He was scheduled to arrive the next day on the last tram from Heerenveen. Could B19 possibly pick up this boy and deliver him to his next address? Underground workers needed cooperation from each other and B19 could not refuse. It was early fall and that meant early darkness; at eight o'clock it would be Sperrzeit, (curfew time).

This German rules forbid anybody to be outside after eight. German patrols would rather shoot first and ask questions later. Canals crisscrossed the city and formed another danger in the dark. Some people had fallen in and drowned. You had to know your way around the different areas of the city. Long before the scheduled arrival of the last tram, B19 left his house for the short walk to the tram station. From a dark spot he watched the proceedings. Everything seemed to be safe. He could not see any sign of a German patrol, something to be thankful for. Finally he heard the tram coming, the squealing of the wheels against the rails in the last corner, followed by the sound of the brakes.

Very few passengers got off the tram, when it stopped. They disappeared quickly in the dark. Only one small street lantern was allowed on the platform. A large metal cone covered the top, leaving only a bit of dark blue light to shine downwards. B19 stayed hidden. The engineer and his helper disconnected the locomotive and moved it inside the building. Before the big doors closed, you could see them working on the fire under the steam-kettle. Meanwhile the conductor locked the doors of the compartments and went into the station office. Soon he came back with the station manager. Together they left, shouting a good bye to the engineer and his helper. Not waiting for an answer they disappeared in the darkness.



B19 noticed a boyish figure appearing in the small cone of light. He was carrying a school bag. There was something familiar about that boy, B19 thought. When the boy left the cone of light, B19 walked over to him. They glanced at each other, a boy of thirteen or fourteen years of age and an older man.

They had never seen each other before. B19 was puzzled by the familiarity in the boys face, he could not place it. The pair greeted each other with the prearranged questions and answers. "Let's go", urged the guide, "it is close to Sperrzeit". Their footsteps seemed to be the only ones in the dark streets of Sneek.



B19 started a conversation with a few general questions.

“Where are you from?” “From Haarlem, Sir.”

“Do your parents live in Haarlem?” “Yes, of course.”

“What does your Dad do for a living?” “Oh, he has a business.”

“What kind of business?” “Why do you ask all this?”

Why did B19 ask all these questions? B19 found that the boy's voice sounded strangely familiar but he wanted to be absolutely sure, too much was at stake, and he kept the conversation going.

“Have you got any brothers or sisters?” “Uh, ... no, I'm an only child.”

“The only one? How old are you?” “I'm fourteen.”

“Are you fourteen, or almost fourteen?” “What do you mean?”

“Oh, just small talk. I think that you sound more like an Amsterdammer than somebody from Haarlem. We used to live in Amsterdam”

B19 was now almost sure that the boy he had picked up at the tram station to take to his next hiding place was the older son of the Locher couple. Two or three more questions should confirm it. "What did you say your name was?" "I've told you, it's Herman." When he asked the next question, B19 tried to talk as quietly and reassuringly as possible: "Did your father have a fish store on the Sarphati Street, in Amsterdam?"

At this point, Herman told me later, he would have liked to run away from this quiet man, who seemed to know too much about him. If only he had known where to go. Herman stopped and B 19 reminded him of the Sperrzeit. They kept on walking. Herman was obviously nervous and close to tears.

## Is tomorrow your birthday?

One more full and honest answer was needed, B19 told Herman, before he could hear the full story and find out about possibly Herman's biggest birthday surprise ever. "Was your real name Jacob, Jacob Locher, and is tomorrow your birthday." "Who are you and how come you know this?" Herman asked.

B9 told him how his parents had been hiding in Sneek for almost a year now. That Herman would be picked up the next afternoon to meet his father and mother. It would be late afternoon and he could not stay long. Herman would be taken back to his new address just before Sperrzeit. Maybe more visits could follow later.

Silently crying, Jacob/Herman walked beside his guide. Could this all be true? It seemed impossible to believe, but how could this man know so much about him? They stopped in front of a house in a residential area. B19 rang the doorbell and told the person who opened the door that their guest, Herman had arrived. Also that Herman was going to be picked up late the next afternoon. Herman would tell them why. B19 turned around and disappeared in the darkness. He was home just before eight o'clock.

Our mother had a hard time believing what father told her. Things like that happened in books, not in real life. Then her practical mind took over. Mr. Locher had to be told first, he would be able to take the news, she thought. With a poor excuse, Mr. Locher was taken aside in the kitchen. He was so happy, especially for his wife. How to tell her remained a problem. Just mentioning any of the children's names would bring an outburst of tears, which upset her for the whole night.

Around the table that evening, the conversation went to chance meetings and later there was talk about Jewish parents who got good news about their children. Children they had not heard from for at least a year. This general talk did not help to keep the tears away. She got up from her chair, "What are you hiding from me, why am I left out? What do you all know that I don't?" Slowly she was made aware of the tremendous news about her son Jacob. She did not leave the living room that night. Her tears were not the only tears around the table. The name Jacob was heard a lot. Nobody really knew what to say. That evening there was much crying and a lot of laughing around the table.

The next morning, we got some of the last of the rye grains out of the kitchen cupboard and ground them extra fine in the old hand cranked coffee mill. We made a batter from the flour and baked cookies on top of the stove. It was very different from a fancy birthday cake, but who needed a fancy cake for this special birthday? Late in the afternoon Herman came. When father picked him up, he was already waiting behind the front door, wearing his coat. Somehow everybody called him Jacob.

Jacob came into our home the same way his parents did, about a year earlier. Through the store door, through the sliding door, to the bottom of the stairs and then it took him a couple of jumps to make it upstairs where his parents were waiting. This special moment was only for the Lochers. The deBoer family joined later. Jacob stayed for supper and later we had the cookies, followed by singing "Happy Birthday." It was sung softly because the neighbours knew that none of the deBoers had a birthday and it was better not to start any questions. Father escorted Jacob back to the other address in town and was back home just before Sperrzeit. Several visits followed in the next few weeks.

The underground finally located a suitable place for the Locher couple at a farm not far from Sneek. They also found a nearby spot for Jacob, close enough for visiting.

With the arrival of the Canadian army in April 1945 the German occupation ended. Very slowly life returned to more normal conditions. When people could travel again, the Lochers returned to Amsterdam. Everything was stolen from their home. Even the shelves had disappeared out of the cupboards. Amsterdam had indeed gone through extremely difficult times. Circumstances in the Dutch capital had been a lot worse than around Sneek.

A few weeks later Louis Locher, the younger son, returned to Amsterdam the underground had put him in a Roman Catholic institution in the southern part of Holland. Here, nuns had kept Louis safe from German hands.

## **The last contact**

The contact between the Locher and the deBoer family slowly disappeared. Mrs. Locher visited us at my sister's wedding. We still have a photo of her coming down the steps of city hall. This happened in October 1945. Later, in 1948, two of my brothers visited the Lochers in Amsterdam.

Sometime during 1948 or 1949 the Lochers left Holland and immigrated to the USA. Mrs. Locher had relatives in the U.S. My parents received a birth announcement later.

BORN
ESTER,
DAUGHTER OF
ABRAHAM AND SARAH LOCHER

## **End of this story**

### **Some historical notes**

In May 1940 the German army invaded the Netherlands, approximately 160,000 Jews lived in Holland, of whom 140,000 were Dutch Citizens and 16,000 had left Germany prior to the World War, 2,000 came from Poland.

- Around 100,000 Jews lived in or near Amsterdam; this was about 10% of the population of the Dutch capital.
- The action against Jews started soon after the German occupation. Civil servants were the first ones to be "weeded out". Dismissal of anybody with a Jewish background started in September 1940, and lasted for three months.
- There were protests at some universities, particularly in Leiden and Groningen.
- Protests in mainline churches followed immediately, first in the Protestant - and shortly later in much stronger wording, in the Roman Catholic Church.
- Press and radio were put under total censorship after some newspapers published protesting editorials.
- Listing of Jewish Companies and stores scheduled to be put under German control started in November 1940.
- January 1941, Dutch civil servants start the registration of all Jews in the country.
- On February 22 and 23, 1942, Amsterdam experiences the first of many German raids on its Jewish population and 389 Jews are taken to Buchenwald.
- The Communist party organized the first strike against German treatment of Jews in Holland. The strike happened at the main shunting yard of the railroad in Amsterdam on February 25.
- Jewish doctors were no longer permitted to treat non-Jewish patients as of November 1941.
- The first train to Westerbork left Amsterdam on July 14, 1942. The train carried 962 people with space for 1400. This increased German raid activities.
- Close to hundred and twenty thousand Jews were taken from Holland to German camps. Less than ten thousand returned.

Historical notes from "10,000 YEARS HISTORY OF THE NETHERLANDS" by K. Jansma  
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