HIDDEN

• LIKE ANNE FRANK •

Fourteen True Stories of Survival

HID

MARCEL PRINS & PETER HENK STEENHUIS
Translated by Laura Watkinson

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LIKE ANNE FRANK

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For my mother, who inspired me to start this project

— M.P.

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FOREWORD

This book tells the stories of fourteen people who had to go into hiding during World War II because they were Jewish. Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nazi Party in Germany, believed the Jews were the cause of all evil in the world. So they had to be destroyed. My mother was considered to be a part of that "evil." But she was one of the lucky ones: She was hidden, and she survived.

At that time — summer 1942 — she was nearly six years old. Even as a little boy, I was curious about the story of her time in hiding. She told me what had happened. The exciting parts and the times when she had been scared or sad made a particularly strong impression on me.

Later, when I started to look into the experiences of other people who went into hiding, I found out that their stories were all very different. And that many of the people who went into hiding had not survived the war, because someone revealed their location or the Nazis found them during raids. About 28,000 Jews were hidden in the Netherlands. Roughly 16,000 survived and 12,000 were caught or betrayed in hiding. The most famous example is, of course, Anne Frank, whose diary has been read by people all over the world.

But what did going into hiding actually involve? Where did you go? How did you know who to trust? How did you find money to pay for your hiding place? What did you do when you were frightened? These are the kinds of questions that I asked men and women who are old now but who were young boys and girls

during the war. You can read about their experiences in this book. The first story is my mother's.

There is a website accompanying the book: www.hidden likeannefrank.com. There you can see more photographs, watch short animated clips, and hear a part of each person's story as it was told to me. You can also learn about other young people who went into hiding, whose stories are not included here.

In this book, we've included a map at the beginning of every chapter that shows the places in the Netherlands where that person went into hiding. Sometimes it was only one address, but it was usually several locations. One of the people in this book hid in more than forty-two different places! There is also an interactive map on the website, where you can click on a dot on the map to hear and see the story that happened in that place.

Read, look, and listen!

Marcel Prins

North Sea
Netherlands
Sint
Jacobiparochie
Waddenzee
Sneek
IJsselmeer
Markermeer
IJmuiden
Amsterdam
Haarlem
Bussum
Nieuw-
Vennep
Amersfoort
Leiden
Zeist
Utrecht
The Hague
Veenendaal
Rotterdam
Waal
Oosterschelde
Tilburg
Antwerp
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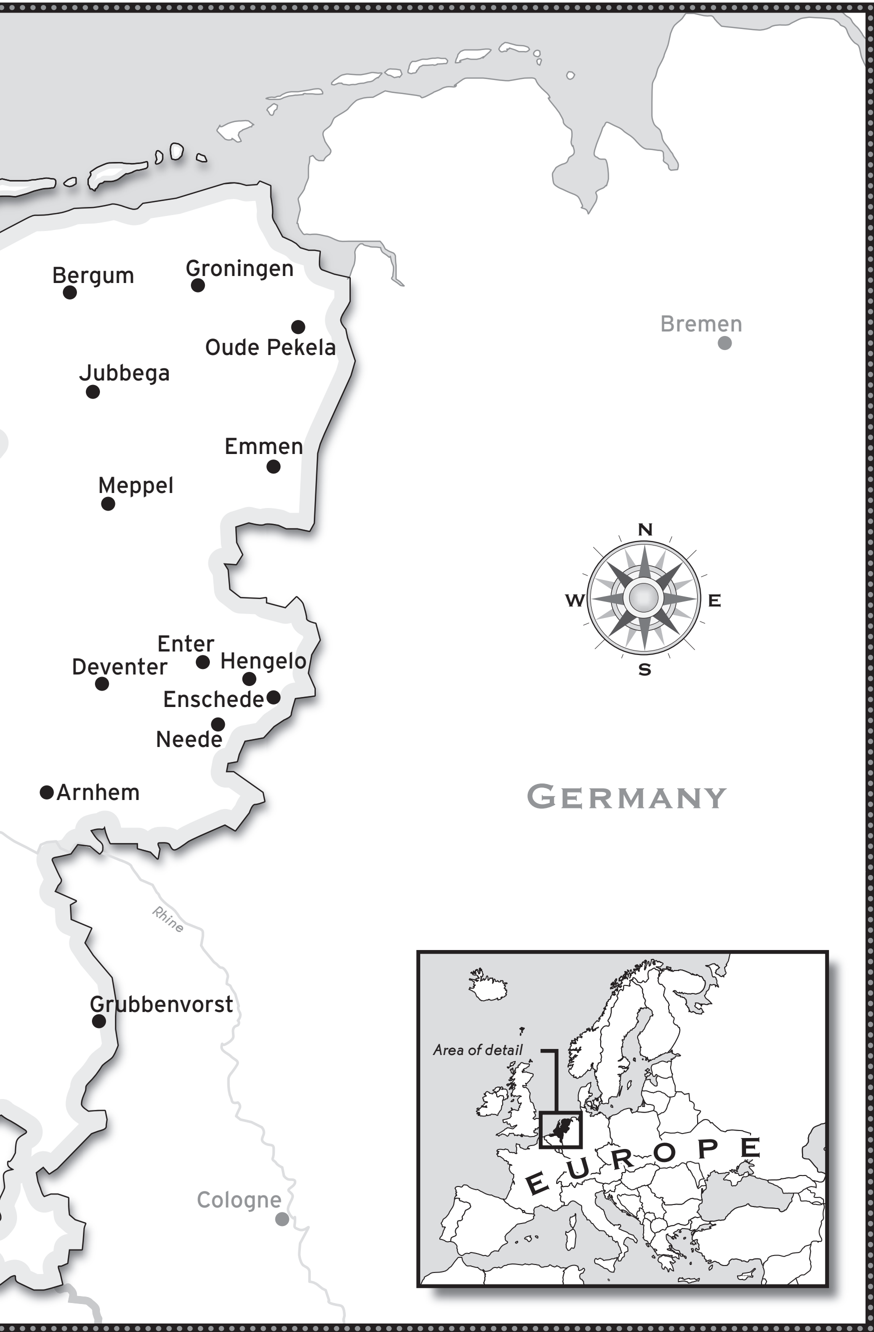

Bergum
Groningen
Oude Pekela
Jubbega
Emmen
Meppel
Bremen
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S
Enter
Deventer
Hengelo
Enschede
Neede
Arnhem
Germany
Rhine
Grubbenvorst
Cologne
Area of detail
Europe

Rita with her mother, Bertha Degen-Groen, c. 1939

THE STARS HAVE GONE AWAY

RITA DEGEN

Born in Amsterdam on December 25, 1936

In 1939, when I was three years old, my father was called up for the army. The camp was located near the Grebbe Line, which was an important point of defense. My mother and I went there on the train twice to visit him. He was out there with a group of soldiers, all of them in uniform, and I remember thinking how strange they looked. They were living in a large farmhouse. Mom and I were allowed to stay overnight in a separate room. I thought it was kind of fun.

When the war broke out, my father's regiment had to march toward the Grebbeberg, a hill that was in a strategic position. There was heavy fighting, and lots of men were wounded and dying. My father realized it was going badly, so he grabbed his bike and rode back to Amsterdam. He arrived in the middle of the night, without his rifle and his kit bag. He must have gotten rid of them somewhere.

My father always liked to know exactly what was going on, so he found a job with the **Jewish Council**,[1] which had been founded in 1941 on the orders of the Germans to represent the Jewish community in the Netherlands. My father was on guard duty when one of the first groups of Jewish people was transported out of Amsterdam. What he saw made him decide to send me into hiding right away. My parents went into hiding that same week. He had already arranged hiding places for all of us, not just

1. **Jewish Council** (German: *Judenrat*): administrative organizations that the German occupiers ordered Jewish communities to set up to manage Jewish affairs. The council had the task of carrying out some of the measures that the Germans imposed on the Jews. Anyone who worked for the Jewish Council was temporarily exempted from deportation. Thousands of people were involved in the work of these organizations.

Many Jewish people resented the council members, particularly the leaders, for following the orders of the occupying Germans, and they thought the exemption from deportation was unfair, but a lot of Jewish Council members secretly tried to help others whenever they had the chance.

for the immediate family but also for his parents and for all of my mother's brothers and sisters. But they never made use of them. "It won't be as bad as all that," they said.

Soon after my parents went into hiding, their house was "Pulsed," or cleared out. The Germans had given Abraham Puls and his company the job of emptying the houses of Jews who had gone into hiding or who had been rounded up during a **raid**.[2] We were lucky: Our neighbors, who were good people, had a key to our house, and they took everything they could carry and hid it for us. After the war, we got back our photographs, a set of cutlery, a figurine, and a clock.

The first address where I went into hiding was in Amsterdam, at my father's boss's house. He was Jewish but his wife was not. **Mixed marriages**[3] of this kind seemed relatively safe at first, but it was still risky for them to take in and hide a Jewish child. It was around this time that I began to realize I was Jewish, without really understanding what that meant.

Before the war, our family had been all kinds of things: vegetarians, followers of holistic healing, and atheists. Of course, we had traditions. We had plenty of them, in fact. We ate matzos at Passover, and my mother would bake *gremsjelies*, a special Passover cake made from matzos, raisins, almonds, and candied citrus peel. We owned a menorah, a candelabrum used in Jewish worship,

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2. **raid**: a police or army action to find people and take them into custody.
3. **mixed marriage**: usually a marriage between two people of different religious backgrounds or nationalities. In this case, a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew. Generally, Jews in mixed marriages were not required to report for deportation, and their children did not have to wear stars on their clothing to indicate that they were Jewish. They did, however, have to obey the other rules that the German occupiers had made for Jews.

and we used to light candles. My mother also used a lot of Yiddish expressions, but that was just normal for me.

What was not normal was having to leave kindergarten about three months after the war started. The little boy who lived next door was also Jewish, and the same thing happened to him. So we just went back to playing together again, as we had before we started kindergarten.

I began to get a better understanding of what it meant to be Jewish when my foster parents started discussing my birthday. When I went into hiding, I was five and it was months before my sixth birthday, which I was already looking forward to. My foster father, Walter Lorjé, said, "If anyone asks how old you're going to be on your next birthday, you have to say five. Never tell them you're almost six."

I thought that was awful. I wanted to be a big girl. "Why not?" I asked.

"When you're six," he replied, "you have to wear a **star**."[4]

I knew that you didn't want to have that star on your clothes. My mother had had to wear a star, and it was a nuisance. I was five and I didn't fully understand what it meant to be Jewish, but I could sense that there was something wrong with it. That feeling grew stronger by the week, especially when the raids started and conversations were often about who had been rounded up and who was still around.

The Lorjé family, who had taken me in, had three children. The eldest, Wim, was fifteen. We sometimes used to play together

4. **star**: a Star of David on a yellow background with the word *Jood* (Dutch: Jew) in the center. From May 3, 1942, all Jews six years and older had to wear this star on their outer clothes. The star had to be clearly visible and firmly attached, or the person would be punished.

with his toy cars. That always made me so happy, because it meant that I could do something with another person for once. I didn't get to play with friends, saw none of my family, and didn't go to school. I was very eager to learn, but no one taught me anything. Their daughter Marjo had made me terrified, not of the Germans but of beetles, spiders, dirt, and all kinds of other imaginary dangers. I didn't dare to flush the toilet anymore because I thought all kinds of things would come whooshing out of it.

Whenever Aunt Loes, a cousin of Mrs. Lorjé's, came to visit, I had to go out to a nearby playground. Aunt Loes was married to the man who managed the family's stationery store. Mr. Lorjé was Jewish, so the Germans had handed over the management of the store to Aunt Loes's husband. He was called a *Verwalter* in German, an administrator. Aunt Loes often used to visit the house to discuss the stationery store. If I happened to bump into her, I'd been told to say I was Rita Houtman, who lived across the street. I had to go out and stay in the nearby playground until the coast was clear, and then someone would come for me.

But one time it was different. Aunt Loes had said she was coming to visit, so Marjo took me to the playground. As she left, she said, "Aunt Loes won't stay long. You can come home at six." Of course, she should never have said that.

In the playground, there was a slide and a merry-go-round that you had to push yourself. I didn't do that. There were also a couple of swings and a seesaw. But you can't seesaw by yourself, so I didn't do that either. I just sat there with my little pail and shovel in the wet sand of an enormous sandbox. All of the other children had gone to school. I just sat there alone in the playground, which

was surrounded by a tall chicken-wire fence. After a while, I began to feel cold and thirsty.

As soon as the church clock struck six, I picked up my pail and shovel and ran home.

The front door was closed, so I rang the bell. Someone upstairs pulled the rope to open the door. There, halfway down the stairs, was Aunt Loes. She looked at me. "And who might you be?"

I knew right away that this wasn't good. "I'm Rita Houtman. I live on the other side of the street. I've just come to see if Mrs. Lorjé has some sugar to spare."

She turned to Mr. Lorjé, who was standing at the top of the stairs, and said, "Hmm, if I didn't know better, I'd think that was Rita Degen." Then she walked past me and out of the house.

Huge panic. My suitcase was packed immediately, and I was taken to stay with someone in **the resistance**[5] that night. The next day, a woman came to pick me up. "Hello," she said, "I'm Aunt Hil. We're taking the train together tomorrow, to Hengelo."

Taking the train to Hengelo. That'd be fun. I hadn't been on a train for ages.

"Hengelo," Aunt Hil told me the next day, "is where Aunt Marie and Uncle Kees live. They're very nice people. And they're really excited about meeting you. They so want you to come and live with them. They have a little baby too, who's not even a year old yet."

It was a long journey, and by the time we reached Hengelo I knew everything I needed to know. I knew what Aunt Marie and

5. **the resistance**: organizations carrying out activities against occupying forces, such as helping people go into hiding, printing and distributing underground newspapers, and acts of sabotage.

Uncle Kees looked like and that I was going to be living in a corner house with a garden, and I really believed that they were looking forward to seeing me.

Just before we reached the house, Aunt Hil said to me, “Shall we play a little joke on them? Why don’t you sit down with your suitcase on the sidewalk at the front of the house, and I’ll go around the back? I’ll say to them, ‘I have bad news, I’m afraid. Rita couldn’t come with me after all.’ They’ll be really disappointed, of course. And to make it up to them, I’ll say that I’ve brought them a package and it’s out front on the sidewalk. They’ll go take a look and when they open up the door . . . Surprise!”

I thought it was a great idea. Aunt Hil walked around to the back of the house.

A couple of minutes later, the front door swung open. I could tell that the woman who came to the door was a very nice person. “Oh, Hil!” she said. “You were just teasing me. Rita, how wonderful that you’re here! Come in, come in. Your room’s all ready. And won’t Uncle Kees be pleased when he gets home!”

At the time, I had no idea that Aunt Hil had actually taken me to her sister’s house. She didn’t have a clue that I was coming, and Aunt Hil had to explain to her first. I had no reason to suspect. The room was beautiful, just as Aunt Hil had said it would be. It wasn’t until long after the war that Uncle Kees told me the room had been prepared for any child who might have to go into hiding, and not just for me.

Right from the start, I felt perfectly at home at that second address. I didn’t doubt for a moment that I was truly wanted. Aunt Hil, who also stayed for a few days, told Uncle Kees that I

was a Christmas baby. “She was born on Christmas Day.” They thought that was wonderful. Uncle Kees pointed at their own baby and said, “Wim will be one when you’re seven.”

That gave me a real shock! When I was almost six, I’d had to say I was going to be five on my next birthday, so now that I was going to be seven, I should be saying I was nearly six. I thought I was always going to have to fib and keep knocking a year off my age or they’d make me wear a star.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” asked Uncle Kees, who could see the fear on my face.

“You can’t say that. You have to say I’m nearly six.”

“Why?”

“If I say that I’ll be seven on my next birthday, then I’ll have to wear a star.”

“You don’t have to wear a star at all,” said Uncle Kees. “From now on, your name is Rita Fonds. You live here with us. You are our little Rita-pie and our little Rita-pie doesn’t wear a star, because no one in our house wears a star.”

So now I was one of the Fonds family, and not one of the stars. And then I thought: The stars have gone away. That made me feel so good, even though I didn’t know at the time what the stars really meant.

But I still felt like there was something strange about me. I didn’t go to school, for example, but had private lessons. They said it was because I hadn’t learned anything yet and I had to catch up. I learned how to read and write in no time. I was really eager to learn, because I wanted to read my parents’ letters and I wanted to write back. It wasn’t because I was really missing them but

Rita with her "brother," Wim, 1944

more because I enjoyed writing. As far as I was concerned, my parents were just snapshots. I had a photograph in my room: They were my mother and father, and I wrote them letters. But it didn't feel real at all. I never worried about how the letters actually reached my parents. Even after I'd caught up with my lessons, I didn't ever go to school in Hengelo. Apparently it was too risky in such a small community for a new girl suddenly to turn up at school.

There were a lot of factories in Hengelo, and the British started bombing the city in 1943. They didn't want the Germans to be able to use the buildings. So at night we — Aunt Marie, little Wim, and I — often used to huddle together under the stairs. "Don't be frightened," I said to Aunt Marie. "If we die, the three of us will go together." Uncle Kees, who did all kinds of work for the resistance, sometimes used to come and sit with us under the stairs and occasionally there was another person who

was in hiding, such as Aunt Marie's youngest brother, Remmert, who'd been ordered to report for the ***Arbeitseinsatz***.[6] Whenever the situation looked dangerous, Uncle Kees would pull up the rug from under the dining table and open the trapdoor, and Remmert would disappear beneath the floor. Then the rug went back and little Wim was placed on top of it, with his building blocks. I remember the Germans coming into the house on two occasions. They were looking for people who had gone into hiding, but all they found were two little blond children playing together.

At the beginning of 1944, the whole family was evacuated to a house on Kwakersplein, a square in Amsterdam. It was just in time — a week after we left, a bomb fell on the house in Hengelo. In Amsterdam I was able to go to school for the first time. I was just part of the family. There were so many newly formed households that no one tried to work out exactly how all of the family members were related. I attended that school for no more than six months at most. I thought it was wonderful. Finally I was among children my own age. But they were so much better than I was at reciting times tables. I'd never done it before.

It was in Amsterdam that I first came to understand what could happen if you were Jewish. That came about because of Danny, one of my classmates, a beautiful boy with dark eyes and black curls. We walked to school together every day until, one morning, I rang his bell and his mother came to the door with puffy red eyes. She told me that Danny was staying with someone and wouldn't be coming to school for a while. Then I suddenly

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6. ***Arbeitseinsatz***: (German: forced labor) Many German men had been called up to join the army, so Dutch men were taken to Germany to work there toward the end of the war. The men, and sometimes women, were simply rounded up and sent to Germany. Many non-Jewish men tried to escape this forced labor by going into hiding like the Jews.

realized: Was she really his mother? His name isn't Danny Pieterse, I thought, no more than mine is Rita Fonds.

When the **Hunger Winter**[7] began, our school had to close: There was no heating, no food, nothing. I spent all day out on the streets, looking for something to eat. Aunt Marie fixed my long blond hair into two braids so that I would look like a perfect little Nazi girl. Around the corner from where we lived, there was a food depot next to a small ***Wehrmacht***[8] barracks. I used to go there and hang around until a soldier gave me a carrot or a piece of bread.

When I got home, I would proudly say to Aunt Marie, "Look what I've got!"

"How did you get that?" she'd ask.

"Well, I don't say anything to soldiers, but they always come over and start talking to me. 'Hello there, little miss.' Imagine if they knew who I was!"

I used to scour the streets for fuel too. There were small wooden blocks between the tram rails that were perfect for our little camping stoves. It wasn't allowed of course, but everyone used to take the blocks. You had to be careful while you were doing it, though, because if the Germans spotted you, they would drive up and fire their guns. I wasn't strong enough to pull the blocks out by myself, but I was small and thin and fast, and I knew how to put that to good use. I used to sneak up behind people who were whipping out the blocks. I slipped between their legs, swiped a block, threw it into my bag, and got out of there as fast as I could.

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7. **Hunger Winter** (Dutch: *Hongerwinter*): the Dutch famine in winter 1944–45, when there was a serious shortage of food in much of the Netherlands, causing many people to starve to death.
8. ***Wehrmacht***: the name of the German army from 1935 to 1945.

In the fall of 1944, before that harsh winter really began, we'd gone to stay with some relatives on a farm near Zaandam for a few weeks. We walked ten miles to get there, all the way from Amsterdam. When you're eight years old and you haven't eaten nearly enough, that's a very long way to walk. When we finally arrived, it felt like we were in heaven. They even had real butter on the farm!

But during the Hunger Winter, things became more and more difficult, partly because Aunt Marie was pregnant. She suffered from malnutrition, which caused her legs to swell up so badly that she could hardly stand. So I lined up at the baker's every day, starting at four thirty in the morning, with the hope of getting some bread for my ration coupons. I intended to take care of Aunt Marie, and so I became a little thief who begged for coal at the barracks. At the market, where farmers would still occasionally bring a few carrots, potatoes, and sugar beets to sell, I stole whatever I could lay my hands on.

Since Danny's disappearance, I'd been aware that strange things could happen when you were Jewish, but I still knew nothing about Judaism as a religion. Uncle Kees and Aunt Marie didn't tell me about it, and they raised me as a Protestant. I really enjoyed going to church on Sundays, because the hymns were so lovely. I didn't understand what I was singing, but I thought it sounded absolutely wonderful.

I made friends with a Catholic girl. One day she asked if I'd like to go to church with her sometime. Yes, I said, why not? Well, it was one of those Catholic churches with statues, paintings, rosaries — a big difference from that bare Protestant church. My friend taught me to recite the Hail Mary, in Latin too. I was in

seventh heaven. I thought the Catholic religion was so much more beautiful than Protestantism, and they did much more singing too. I asked Uncle Kees and Aunt Marie why we didn't go to a Catholic church. They couldn't give me a convincing answer, but they never tried to force their religion on me either.

Every night, I obediently said my prayers to the Lord Jesus in Heaven, because I thought there was someone up there looking down on me and if I behaved myself he'd think I was a good little girl and do things to help me.

But after liberation, I soon stopped believing. There was a huge party in Amsterdam on May 7, two days after the Netherlands was liberated. Everyone went out onto the streets, including us: Aunt Marie with her big belly, Wim in the baby carriage, and me skipping alongside. We danced and cheered as we headed to Dam Square, right in the center of Amsterdam. But there were still some Germans around, and they opened fire on the crowd from a balcony on a tall building. We hid behind the royal palace as quickly as we could. When we got back home to Kwakersplein at the end of that amazing day, Aunt Marie said, "Well, Rita-pie, you've just got to wait for your parents to get here now. They're sure to come soon, because the war's over and we're all free."

It's not going to happen, I thought. It's not allowed to happen! I never want to leave here! My parents meant nothing to me. There was only one person, or so I believed, who had the power to make sure I could stay with the Fonds family: the good Lord Himself. At night, I got down on my knees and prayed for hours for my parents to let me stay with Aunt Marie and Uncle Kees.

There was one thing I knew for sure: I couldn't abandon Aunt Marie while she was pregnant. I looked after her. She depended

on me. But I thought I still had plenty of time. My parents wouldn't come back that soon, would they?

I was wrong about that: In the middle of May, there was a knock at the door. I was playing with my foster brother on the balcony, and I heard Uncle Kees open the door and cry, "Wow, Beb, Frits, fancy you being here so soon!" I immediately knew who they were, and I sat down with my back to the room. Then Aunt Marie called me, "Rita-pie, look who's here!" I heard them coming up the stairs, and I turned around and said, "Hello, ma'am. Hello, sir." That was it. I just went on playing.

Many years later, Uncle Kees told me how he'd pleaded with my father, "Don't take her right now. Leave her here. Just take her out to the zoo for the day first, and then let her stay with you for a night." My father wouldn't hear of it.

Rita, shortly after the war, 1945

I said I wanted to look after Aunt Marie until the baby came. But that didn't persuade my parents. They just took me away. I can't even remember saying good-bye.

And that was the moment I stopped believing. If Our Dear Lord didn't intervene, I was done with him. For two days, I tried saying, "Lord, bless this food, amen," before we ate. And my parents told me, "We don't do that." Fine then, I thought, I don't believe in it anyway.

I heard nothing from Uncle Kees and Aunt Marie. There was no telephone, and it was too far to walk to visit them. I was desperately unhappy. I'd been planning to take care of Aunt Marie until the baby arrived. What was going to happen to her without me? I didn't even hear about the existence of little Inge until two months after the birth. I thought of her as my new baby sister.

I went once with my mother to our old house on Jekerstraat. There was somebody else living there. My mother could see the sunshade that she'd put up herself on the balcony. She wanted to have it for the new house. So we rang the doorbell and asked for it. The house had been cleared out, all except for a painting above the fireplace. "Mom!" I cried. "That's our painting." The people living there didn't even flinch. The house had been assigned to them, along with everything else. We never got the sunshade back.

For a long time, I kept looking for the little boy who had lived next door, but he never came back. And neither did my grandparents or my mother's seven brothers and sisters, the ones my father had arranged hiding places for at the beginning of the war.