

## Prologue



Today, we stay inside, Menno,” my mother whispered softly as the light from the rising sun filtered through the branches that concealed us from the outside world. Although I was only six years old during this, the second year of our family’s time in hiding, I was able to sense a quiver of fear in her voice that unnerved me.

“Am I going to die, Mama?” I asked plaintively. Actually, I spoke in Dutch: “*Ga ik dood, Mama?*”

My mother clutched me to herself and told me to shush, yet I could tell that my question, offered in all innocence, had brought tears to her eyes. I had overheard the farmer who had agreed to conceal us when he came to our hiding place and informed my father that we should remain in our hole, under the fake woodpile, and not venture out. A German tank battalion was conducting training exercises nearby, and if the soldiers discovered he was hiding Jews, we would all be shot on the spot.

It was the spring of 1943 and I had already lost count of the number of places where our little family—my parents and me—had sought refuge during our treacherous odyssey across the countryside of rural Holland. While over the course of the past year we had slept in more

than a dozen places—tool sheds, dairy barns, chicken coops, haystacks, behind fake walls and even on the open ground—this place was without question the most dreadful.

Our host, a farmer who had been enlisted by the Dutch resistance movement called the L.O. (*Landelijke Organisatie voor Hulp aan Onderduikers*), had moved us out of the basement of his home the week before because it had become too dangerous for us to stay there. He and his workers had dug a shallow pit in an adjacent field and covered it with a fake woodpile. Every evening all three of us would crawl through a little secret door in the hollow structure that served as our nocturnal hiding place. We would typically emerge in the morning and were able to walk around somewhat freely till dark. But not today.

My mother tried to keep me occupied by reciting stories and focusing my attention on the shapes of the different leaves we came across in our dank dungeon. But soon we heard from high above us the ominous approaching roar of British RAF planes on their way to bomb the assembled German tanks.

Pressing one eye to the inside of the fake woodpile, my mother could make out two German soldiers who were hurriedly collecting branches and foliage with which to camouflage their tank. Soon they would reach our hiding place. The fake woodpile had been constructed using logs and branches that still held their leaves and could be used by the soldiers to cover up and conceal their tank.

My father also saw the pair approaching and turned to my mother. He looked squarely into her face and told her gravely: “If they discover us, it’s all over for us, Paula.”

My mother began reciting the *Sh'ma* in a low whisper as she clutched me even more tightly to her bosom. We could hear the soldiers’ voices as

they made their way along the row of real woodpiles, growing ever closer to our fake one. We held our collective breath as one of the pair climbed up on our woodpile and began removing the branches. In another moment we would be discovered, and we knew they would show us no mercy. After all, we had committed a serious crime in the eyes of the Nazi regime. We had been born Jewish.

And then ... a miracle of miracles. My mother's invocation of Judaism's core credo was answered. We listened with bated breath as one soldier shouted to the other: "Why are you going so far away, Hans? There are plenty of branches right here." At this, his comrade abandoned our hiding place and, by the grace of G-d, we were spared and permitted to see another sunrise.

I'm Glad I Got This Far

## Chapter One

### Raised on the Run

*For I, the LORD your G-d, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you,  
“Fear not, I am the one who helps you.”*

—Isaiah 41:13



My name is Menno. I was born in Amsterdam to a couple who had, along with another 25,000 fellow German Jews—including the family of Anne Frank—fled from Frankfurt am Main to the Netherlands during the rise of Nazism in the late 1930s. The headline of the *New York Times* on the day I was born, February 5, 1938, read: “Hitler assumes control of army; retires 15 generals. Ribbentrop made foreign minister.” Yes, Hitler was on the move, and the Jews of Europe were bracing for the worst.

I arrived to the world in a small hospital known as “The Sis,” the only child of Paula (née Kaiser), 27, and Simon Wolf Ratzker, 36, whom everyone in the family called Shim. Shim’s father, my paternal grandfather, was a learned scholar who had immigrated to Frankfurt, Germany, from Lithuania in the nineteenth century. He was, I understand, regarded as a true “*talmud chochum*.” Both he and his wife had died in 1919. Hence, I knew very little about my paternal grandparents other than that

they had left behind thirteen children including my father, Simon. By the time I came along, my father's dozen siblings were scattered around the globe in such places as Brazil, South Africa, and British Mandatory Palestine. I managed to meet only two of them—aunts who had settled in England (Betty Hackenbroch and Recha Glicksman).

My mother's parents were native Germans. Her father, Isadore Kaiser, had served with distinction in the Kaiser's army and saw combat during World War I. He and my grandmother, Bertha, had two children in addition to my mother, Paula, who was the oldest: her brother, Siegfried, and a sister named Claire. The family operated a kosher restaurant and butcher shop in Frankfurt. My mother would recount how she and her siblings worked in the shop every day, except Shabbos, while they were growing up. Sometimes just a whiff of fresh-baked rye bread would trigger her memories of those cherished childhood days.

My maternal grandparents, being German Jews, were known by the somewhat pejorative term of Yekkes. And although my parents had relocated to Holland, we still bore this label. Soon, however, we had earned another name: *onderduikers*, which in Dutch means "those who dive under." We had become divers because in July of 1942, at the instruction of Adolf Eichmann, Holland's German occupiers initiated the Nazi "Final Solution" plan that had been devised that January at the Wannsee Conference in Berlin, and the deportation of Amsterdam's Jews to the death camps got underway. Jews were ordered to report to the "evacuation center" located in nearby Westerbork. The Nazis were surprised when more than a third of Amsterdam's Jews disobeyed the order and failed to show up. This caused them to intensify the *razias* (raids) intended to discover them and drive them out. Things were becoming very ugly for the Jews of Amsterdam.

Although the ultimate fate of the deported Jews was carefully kept hidden from those awaiting their turn for deportation to the east, my father wisely determined that we would not wait to be called up. Instead we would go into hiding and place our fate into the hands of the brave Dutch resistance.

When my father informed my mother that we were to “go underground,” I’m sure she never imagined that we would someday wind up living in a literal hole in the ground. She had serious reservations about the plan, but she trusted my father’s judgment and reluctantly agreed. And thus we joined some 22,000 other Jews on the run, fleeing for our lives from one rural village to the next in the dark of night.

My father had been raised in poverty, one of thirteen orphaned children. This experience had made him tough as nails and street smart. He had the guts to say no. “No, we will not go to the train station and be shipped off to G-d-knows-where. We will go into hiding, instead.” My father’s foresight was vindicated when, after the war, it was learned that some 18,000 of the 22,000 *onderduikers* survived. Compare this to the horrifying statistic that only 5,000 of the more than 100,000 Jews who were deported from Holland came through alive. He clearly had made the right choice.

The geography of the Netherlands made it next to impossible for Jews to flee, however. The entire nation sits on only 16,000 square miles of flatlands. It was also the most densely populated country in Western Europe, with very few isolated open areas in which to find sanctuary. The problem of going into hiding was complicated by the fact that the Dutch civil administration held detailed records of every citizen’s religion—data that fell into the hands of the fanatical SS. Unlike other Nazi-dominated nations that were under the control of the German military, the

bloodthirsty SS were in charge of the occupation of the Netherlands. And this was bad news for Holland's Jews.

Despite these obstacles, the Dutch people mounted a heroic and formidable resistance effort against their Nazi masters. One component was the rescue of those identified as enemies of the Reich (communists, gypsies, Jews) by hiding them via an underground network of farms and villages throughout the Dutch countryside. This effort required the issuing of payments to non-Jewish farmers. Payments of sufficient size to convince the farmers to risk their lives by hiding Jews on their property.

Fortunately, these underground rescue organizations like the L.O. and others never lacked for adequate funding thanks to the work of the N.S.F. (National Support Fund), a clandestine financial entity that received money from the exiled Dutch government in England. It also engaged in large-scale scams that siphoned money from the national bank and the Dutch taxation services. The mastermind behind these covert schemes was a Nazi-hating banker named Walraven van Hall whose work was ultimately discovered by the Nazis. He was subsequently executed by a firing squad at age 39. A monument to this hero, who made possible the payments to the farmers who hid me, my family, and many others, was erected in Amsterdam in September 2010.

The Dutch people, while in many ways facilitating the destruction of their Jewish population, often rose to challenge the rule of their Nazi occupiers. The Germans could count on the assistance of the Dutch administrative infrastructure to help carry out their evil agenda. They needed to employ only a minimal number of their own German personnel in the process of making Holland *Judenrein* (cleansed of Jews), since Dutch policemen were employed to round up the families to be sent to their deaths at Auschwitz and Sobibor. Yet, at the same time, it was in Holland

where the first, and perhaps only, act of mass civil disobedience against the Nazis took place in occupied Europe.

It was less than a year after the “capitulation” of the Dutch government in May 1940—an event that triggered the suicide of more than 120 Amsterdam Jews—and the onset of the German occupation that the *Februaristaking* (the February strike) took place. This was during a period when a so-called velvet glove approach to the occupation was being carried out by the Nazi puppet leader Arthur Seyss-Inquart. The general strike was organized by the outlawed communist party in defense of persecuted Jews and as a protest against the anti-Jewish measures that had recently been put into place by the Nazis. The strike was triggered by a series of *razias* and pogroms in the *Jodenbuurt*, the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam. The strike was harshly suppressed by the Nazis and was quashed within three days.

In April of 1942, the Nazis issued orders for all Dutch Jews to begin wearing the yellow Star of David at all times. This action was publicly condemned by the Roman Catholic Church via a letter that was read aloud at all Sunday parish services. As a result of this act of insubordination, the occupying Nazis treated all Dutch citizens much more harshly than before.

All Jewish men, women, and children were forced to wear the star—emblazoned with the word “*JOOD*” (Jew)—as a mark of shame. By and large, the non-Jewish Dutch population, as demonstrated by the Catholic condemnation, was sympathetic toward our plight. Christian women would bow politely and men would tip their hats when they approached a yellow-star-branded Jew on the street.

Little by little, as the Nazi noose tightened, life became inexorably and exceedingly more difficult for the Jews of Holland. Jewish schools were closed. Jewish men were fired from their jobs, and new restrictions

were announced almost daily. In this incremental, but highly calculated agenda of disenfranchisement, we witnessed our freedoms evaporating before our eyes. In an onerous series of decrees, we were no longer allowed to use telephones, to ride bicycles, or travel in motorcars or on public transportation. Newly erected signs declared that city parks were now closed to dogs and Jews. A Jews-only curfew forced us to remain indoors from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. Shopping was restricted to a few hours each day at only a handful of stores where we would not be likely to come into contact with so-called Aryans. At a certain point, gangs of Gestapo agents visited every Jewish home and stripped it of anything of value. Assets such as jewelry, paintings, silverware, and bank accounts were quickly confiscated by the Reich.

I was four years old when the deportations began in June 1942. It was at this point that my parents decided to leave everything behind—except for me—and vanish into the “underground.” They forfeited their home, their property, their family, friends, and even their personal identities. Somehow, they managed to hold on to their Jewish heritage and pass it on to their young son.

My maternal grandparents, Isadore and Bertha Kaiser, gave up their kosher butcher shop in Frankfurt and followed my parents to Amsterdam, where they and their son, my Uncle Siegfried, opened another butcher shop on Beethovenstrasse. Siegfried, his wife, as well as my grandparents were likewise left behind when we went into hiding. Soon thereafter, however, my grandparents also attempted to go underground, but they were quickly captured and sent first to Westerbork, then to Theresienstadt—the show camp built by the Nazis to fool the Red Cross about their treatment of Jews—and ultimately to Auschwitz. They perished in the flames of the Shoah despite the fact that my grandfather was a decorated veteran who, as mentioned, had fought valiantly for Ger-

many during World War I. Their other daughter, my Aunt Claire, had fortunately managed to flee to America in 1939.

In Frankfurt, my father, Simon, had worked at a successful Jewish metal and chemical business called Behr-Sondheimer. The son of Otho Behr, one of the owners, went on to found the Behr Paint Company in California. In 1934, as Jews were being forced out of “Aryan” businesses in Germany, the company’s owners informed my father he would have to move to their Holland branch. My mother was terribly unhappy about this situation, but eventually they relocated first to the Hague and later, as Jews were being concentrated in the capital, to Amsterdam, where I was born. Our home at 25 Tintorettostraat was about five kilometers from the place where Anne Frank and her family went into hiding.

The question of who betrayed the Franks is one that has haunted the world since the account of the family’s ordeal, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, was first published and became one of the world’s best-selling books of all time. In 2016 a veteran FBI agent and a team of investigators were retained to apply modern crime-solving techniques and technology to this cold case. The results of their extensive efforts were featured on the CBS TV journal *60 Minutes*. It was revealed that the Nazis learned of the Franks’ hiding place due to information provided by a prominent Jewish businessman and founding member of the Amsterdam Judenrat, the Jewish council established by the Nazis. In order to save himself and his own family from deportation to Auschwitz, Arnold van den Bergh turned over a list of secret hiding places across Amsterdam to the Nazis. The warehouse annex in which the Franks had been hiding for two years was on the list.

Unlike the Franks, my parents felt it safer to leave the city and find refuge in the provinces. Of the twenty Jewish families who had, along

with my parents, made plans with the Dutch resistance to flee, my family was the only one to actually do it. The others continued to hold out false hope that the situation would somehow improve and they would not need to give up their homes and go underground. This hope proved to be fatal.

As we made our way from one temporary safe house to another, moving from village to village through places with names like Olderbrook, Zwolle, Venlo, and finally Tienray, my parents tutored me in how to avoid being detected as a Jew by the provincial villagers we found ourselves among. My mother, for example, knew that non-Jews, most of whom had never seen a Jew, believed the stereotype that all Jews were swarthy and dark-haired. Hence, she used henna to turn herself into a redhead. She could thus safely and bravely ride her bicycle—with me firmly planted in the basket—through the village without arousing suspicion. Or so she thought.

I was instructed not to speak any Hebrew words or to ever tell anyone that I was a Jew. I was too young to remember, four or five, but my mother would tell the story of how on one Shabbos day I was about to go out and explore the countryside.

“Now, remember, Menno,” my father cautioned me, “do not say Shabbos if you talk with anyone. Got it?” I nodded and ran off. I soon came upon a farm girl who was working hard in grooming her big black horse with a brush. She smiled as I approached, and so I greeted her and asked:

“Are you allowed to do that on a Saturday?”

This question evidently aroused the farm girl's suspicions, and she soon alerted the authorities that the red-haired lady who rode the bicycle with a little boy might be a crypto-Jew. We fled the village that very

night. When my father reprimanded me for giving away our secret, I protested.

“But, Papa. I did what you said. I didn’t say Shabbos. I said Saturday.”

People have often asked me what it was about my parents that accounted for our family’s survival while so many others perished. They seem to be seeking some sort of universal characteristic or quality that distinguished those who came out alive versus those who did not. The truth is that survival was often simply a matter of luck. Which queue a person guessed would be the right one, which hiding place a person selected, and so on. Yes, my father’s decision for us to go into hiding turned out to be the correct one, but many who made the same decision were betrayed and denounced and were simply unlucky. Fortunately, luck was on our side on more than one occasion as well. Here’s an example:

One morning, as we prepared to say good-bye to our hosts and trek off to yet another village, I fell ill. I remained in my bed and was found to be running a high fever. A member of our group was a physician, and he was called in to have a look at me. After the examination he reported to my mother:

“I have no medicine to administer, Madame Ratzker. He is young and strong and will recover on his own. But, if this boy is moved, he will only become more seriously ill and you may lose him. You must allow him to remain in bed for at least the next 24 hours to afford him time to get better.” Based on the doctor’s advice, we hung back and did not move on with the others to the next destination to which the resistance had directed us.

The doctor was correct. By the following day my fever had broken and I was feeling well enough to travel on. And then the news reached

us. The village where we were to have gone on the previous day had been targeted by the Gestapo, who conducted an “aktion” during the night. All the other Jews in our party, including the doctor, had been captured and shipped off to their deaths. Had we not stayed behind, this would likewise have been our fate. For the remainder of her days, my mother credited me with saving the lives of our family by having the good sense to become sick on that day.

In 1944, after more than two years of continuously living in fear and trepidation, we arrived at the village of Tienray. We had also arrived at the end of our rope. Fortunately we were welcomed by two courageous Righteous Gentiles who helped us to overcome our despair and essentially saved our lives.

Johanna Catharina Maria van de Voort went by the name of Hanna, and we eventually came to call her Aunt Hanna. She was a courageous member of the Dutch resistance who, along with a 22-year-old student named Nico Dohmen (Uncle Nico), rescued more than 150 Jewish children by placing them into foster homes in North Limburg where they would pose as Christians. Hanna had worked as a maternity nurse and midwife in Tienray and developed a strong affinity for saving the lives of children. She felt it was her life's calling.

Hanna began her lifesaving mission by opening her home to children who had been smuggled away from the deportation center in Amsterdam. During the few days spent at her home, the children would receive instruction in Catholic doctrine and were made familiar with the street plan of Rotterdam. They were instructed to say that they had been orphaned during the bombing of Rotterdam in 1940. Each child received a forged identity card that appeared to come from the Rotterdam Central Bureau for Children's Evacuation. After this processing, each child was placed with a farming family in the area. Aunt Hanna and Uncle Nico

maintained contact with the hidden children after they had been placed in order to keep up their spirits. They also dispensed funds from the N.S.F. to the farming families to pay for each child's clothing and food.

Hanna and Nico not only helped to hide Jewish children. They also assisted entire families like ours when we appeared at their doorstep with another *onderduiker* family of four by the name of Peres. Hanna and Nico were known to have assisted escaped French prisoners of war as well as two American Army Air Corps flyers from Ohio who had crash-landed nearby. In recognition of the latter, the pair received a special recognition from General Dwight D. Eisenhower after the war.

Hanna and Nico were assisted in their heroic efforts by an extraordinary young man who acted as a communications runner between their operation and the outside community. We knew him by the name of Ben Joost, but his real name was Curt Lowenstein and his story is a fascinating one.

Born in Germany, Curt, along with his family, fled to Rotterdam after Kristallnacht in 1938. After the German occupation of the Netherlands, Curt's father served on Amsterdam's Judenrat and thereby was able to save the family from deportation to Auschwitz. Curt and his mother were nevertheless unexpectedly rounded up and sent to Westerbork concentration camp in 1943. Somehow, his father managed to get them released. Curt and his mother then each went into hiding separately. Taking on the alias "Ben Joost," the 18-year-old Curt joined Hanna and Nico in rescuing more than 150 Jewish children in hiding. Including me.

After liberation, Lowenstein joined the British Army as an interpreter and assisted them in arresting Nazi leaders in Germany. He immigrated to the United States in 1947 and studied acting in New York City, where he shortened his name to Curt Lowens. He soon went on to Hollywood and developed a career as a popular character actor. Lowens appeared in

more than 100 films and TV shows—usually playing the part of a Nazi villain—before his death in 2017. These roles included appearances in *Hogan's Heroes*, *The Secret of Santa Vittoria*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, and the 1983 remake of *To Be or Not To Be*.

On August 1, 1944, Hanna was arrested by the Nazis and sent to a prison in Eindhoven along with the thirteen Jewish children she was caring for at the time. She was tortured in an effort to gain information about the underground, but she bravely revealed nothing. After nine days of this, she was released and then again took up her underground rescue activities undeterred. Four of the children were murdered at Auschwitz.

In 1987 both Nico and Hanna were honored at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial museum. Hanna had died in 1956, but my wife, Helen, and I were honored to join Nico on the Path of the Righteous Gentiles where two trees were planted to honor these true heroes of the Holocaust.

Nico and Hanna helped to place us in the last venue where we were forced to live in hiding. It was a large farm, filled with orchards and livestock, located on the outskirts of Tienray and owned by a family named Poels. By this point, the German army was in full retreat. A ragged battalion composed of more than 100 members of the Wehrmacht made their way across the farm heading back to Germany. The war-weary soldiers slept in their barn or out in the open each night. Every few days they would slaughter one of the family's pigs and roast it over an open fire. As they departed, the troops took with them whatever food-stuffs they could carry. They also took along one of Mr. Poels's sons as well as my father, whom they intended to use as laborers.

After the soldiers and their prisoners had rowed across the river into Germany, they were spending the night in yet another barn. My father, Shim, noticed a good-sized hole in the wall near a toilet and saw it as an

opportunity for escape. He asked permission to approach to use the toilet. His German guard allowed it, and then turned around out of modesty. Quickly, Shim squeezed through the hole and found himself in an area that held a sort of threshing machine. Deciding he was not in danger, Shim determined that it was safe for him to wait until sunrise to make his escape. He positioned himself atop the equipment and soon fell asleep, but his snoring awakened Mr. Poels's son, who had likewise found sanctuary there. The two made their way back to the river, where they convinced a defeated German soldier to allow them to use his rowboat to ferry them back to Holland, and before long our little family was reunited.

It was not long afterward that Holland was liberated by the British, and we were shipped off to Eindhoven, the town in which the multinational conglomerate Philips was founded in 1891. Our treatment at the hands of the British, who deposited us into a local mental institution, was not the greatest, but at least we were no longer in hiding.

My memories of that place are best described as nightmarish. We came into contact with many of the insane asylum's inmates, who roamed the grounds freely. Even more terrifying was the dehumanizing delousing procedure carried out by our British overseers. We were lined up and ordered to strip naked. Men, women, and children with no regard for modesty or civil decorum. A white-smocked British health officer went down the line brandishing a fire hose from which spewed a horrid white powder that covered us from head to toe. It was done in the name of hygiene, but it was a horrifying and traumatic experience for my young eyes.

Little by little, we began to overcome the fear that had for years been our constant traveling companion. In addition to the indignity of the demonic delousings, we were fed poorly, and questioned repeatedly by the

British to make sure we weren't German spies. As soon as we were free to do so, we left Eindhoven and made our way back to Amsterdam.

Like many returning Holocaust survivors, we discovered, once back in Amsterdam, that there was nothing left of our previous lives. Our home on Tintorettostraat was completely bare, all of our possessions having been appropriated by our gentile neighbors. We found more humble lodgings at 39 Andreas Schelfhoutstraat, where my parents began anew to plan our family's future.

Precious few of our friends and family had managed to survive. Most, like my grandparents, had been systematically turned into ashes by the Nazi killing machine. My parents felt as though they had been tested and hardened in the crucible of the Holocaust. Everything but our very lives and our Jewish souls had been burned away, leaving us raw and ready to rebuild our lives. But where to do it? That was the question.

Could my parents hope to regain what was lost and build a future for themselves and their young son here? Here in Amsterdam, with all its memories and with the ghosts of those who were lost around every corner? Should they go back to Frankfurt? The city had been severely bombed by the Allies. Even the famous medieval city center had been completely destroyed. Plus, how could any Jew possibly build a future in post-Holocaust Germany and hope to feel safe? Should we follow some of our family members who made their way to British Mandatory Palestine after the war? These, and the Jewish survivors who joined them, were mostly idealistic socialists who dreamed of creating a Jewish state in our people's ancient homeland. My father was not that. He was a practical, down-to-earth realist and did not subscribe to such wishful aspirations.

No, he declared. We would instead go to join my mother's sister, Claire. We would go to America. And, as described in the following chapter, that's what we did. To this day, some 75 years later, not a single

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day goes by that I do not thank my father and thank Hashem for delivering us to America.