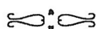
Chapter Thirteen



Rebuilding Our Lives

My parents, Rita, and I returned to Amersfoort where we lived in my grandparents' house at Regentesselaan 22 from 1945 to 1948. When we returned in the spring of 1945, Rita and I didn't remember the house. The house was in terrible condition because a bomb had fallen on the back of the house. Nothing was left in the house. There were no window panes; those had been blown out. When we walked in, we walked onto sand. The parquet floors had been ripped out as were the window frames, doors, etc. There had been no gas or electricity during the war; therefore, people had gone into abandoned houses and torn floors and doors up for firewood. For a time we lived in a bedroom upstairs. Over the windows we nailed up plywood and cut a little hole for light. The house had been stripped; there was no furniture, no pots and pans, dishes, or silverware—nothing. Jews' homes had been "pulsed" (see page 19). At the top of the street was a huge house where Canadian soldiers were billeted. They set up a food kitchen. They gave my mother a big pot, four plates, and four spoons. For breakfast we had milk with crackers in it. They also had lunch and dinner for us—soup or stew.

We waited for people to return. Some came back—emaciated—with horror stories of life in the camps. We

waited. We waited for Grandfather Wolf. We waited for my German grandparents, Simon and Meta. We waited for my Aunt Miep and Uncle Salomon and my cousins, Hartog, Wolf, and Marjan. And we waited. And waited. We were eventually told that they had been taken from Westerbork to Sobibor Death Camp, but there was no proof of this, so my parents, especially my mother, continued to hope for their return.

Rita and I went back to our own names. We had to relearn Dutch because the people in Oldebroek spoke a different dialect. We also had to relearn things like our table manners. My mother was horrified at what we had forgotten about manners.

I never had the relationship with my parents that my children had with me. Rita and I were both closer to my father than to my mother. Maybe she was afraid of losing us again.

Once Rita and I were relatively settled, we started school. I was nine, and Rita, seven. We were both in the first grade. One good thing: I was no longer wearing wooden shoes but a kind of Dr. Scholl-shoe with wooden soles and a leather strap. I wore socks with those. Our clothes were another matter; we had to rely on hand-me-downs from others. We spoke the local Oldebroek dialect; therefore, the students made fun of us. Soon I was moved to the second grade where I learned to speak proper Dutch.

My new girlfriend, Jessy, was an Indonesian girl from the Dutch East Indies, and she is my friend to this day.[14] The citizens of the Dutch East Indies had come back to Holland after the war and the Japanese occupation, if they had relatives

or friends here. The doctor who lived across the street took in the Indonesian family of my girlfriend.

My mother had difficulty dealing with Rita. Rita listened only to me. When my mother wanted us to do something, she went through me. Rita and I were naturally very close. Rita and I had spent three years together. We were four and a half and six and a half when we left our parents and were now again living with our parents who seemed like strangers. Through those years I became Rita's mother and guardian. She totally depended on me during those years. She of course did not understand what was happening around us and thus I watched over her—even though I did not fully understand the situation we were in. I had a tremendous amount of fear about what would happen to us.

In the fall of 1945, I had what was then called a nervous breakdown. Maybe now they would call it a depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. In any case, my mother felt that my behavior was very strange; therefore, she took me to a psychiatrist, but she only took me once because she thought he was crazier than I.

Another doctor decided that I had to have bed rest. I lost six months of school. During this time I stayed at home in bed on a glassed-in porch. I remember watching raindrops hitting the glass and running down the window. Later I had to go to a special school. At this school, each week I was given an assignment and was able to work by myself—self-paced instruction. I also had a French teacher, so I learned French as well as my other studies.

In the spring of 1946, the Canadian Red Cross decided to sponsor a trip out of the country to combat malnutrition of the children. My sister, eight years old, and I, ten years old, left the Netherlands, but we were sent to separate countries. My sister had asthma so she went to Switzerland. I was sent to England; my group gathered at The Hook of Holland (Dutch: Hoek van Holland) and boarded a troop carrier. I was out of school again. What bothered me more than missing school was to be without Rita.

The first two months in England we lived in a former military camp in Wakefield. I spent two months with the whole group of Dutch boys and girls and an additional two months with a family. In the areas of England where I was sent there had been no bombings. In the Wakefield Camp, I lived in a Quonset hut with other ten-year-old girls. We had Dutch teachers. One Sunday the headmistress asked me to come to her office. There I met a couple who had brought me chocolate and oranges. The next Sunday a different couple met me.

At first no one explained to me why I had to meet these people. Eventually they explained that there were only three Jewish children in the camp, me and two Jewish boys; therefore, they thought we three should spend Passover with a Jewish family. The families had interviewed us to see if they wanted to takes us for the holidays. I didn't even remember about Passover, the holiday commemorating the exodus from Egypt.

Nonetheless, finally a couple decided to take me home with them for the holidays. Their family lived in Leeds, which was close by. The father, Dr. David Abel, was a dentist; his

wife, Rosa, a housewife, and they had two girls, Jillian, three, and one-year-old baby, Helen. Another daughter, Judie, was born in 1947. The family was very kind to me and staying with them was very interesting since I only spoke Dutch, and they, English. However, Mrs. Abel was from Austria and could speak German, so this is how we were able to communicate. While I was with them, they took me to synagogue. Synagogue was new to me because I did not remember going. I stayed with them for Passover. They wanted me to stay with them for the next two months; however, the camp officials said no. They told them that I had to stay in the same town as my group.

Our group of ten-year-old girls and boys went to Stratford on Avon, the birthplace and home of William Shakespeare. I was there for two months with the Ford family. I learned a little English there. Mrs. Ford told me that they had had a town meeting of Stratford people who were interested in taking in the Dutch children in my group, but no one there wanted to take me because of my Jewish religion. I suppose it could have been antisemitism. Nonetheless, Mrs. Ford raised her hand to take me. Mr. and Mrs. Ford were very kind and gracious people. Later people were embarrassed about their reluctance to host me because I was Jewish.

Imagine my surprise to see German POWs in the town. Their job was repairing the roads. Seeing them brought back haunting memories for me. It had only been a year since the war had ended.

The school where we had lessons was very old. They did take us on some excursions. We saw the Shakespeare Memorial

Theatre, the gardens, and the swans.[16] To get across the River Avon we took a punt, a flat-bottomed boat with a square-cut bow. The punt was propelled by pushing against the river bed with a pole. I remember learning a song with all the names of cigarettes, sung to the tune of "You are My Sunshine." I also learned an English church song about Christmas.

After these four months, I came home and went to school in Amersfoort. My mother kept in touch with the Abel family in Leeds who invited my sister and I to visit during the Christmas vacation of 1946. Because Uncle Nico, who lived with us and was Dad's boyhood friend, had to go to England on business, he dropped us off in Leeds. The Abel family gave us presents of leather shoes and winter coats. I'll never forget that every evening Mrs. Abel gave us cod liver oil on a spoon. Nasty-tasting. The Abels fed us well. When the family immigrated to Israel in the 1950s, we lost touch with them for many years.

In 2010, I was in Holmdel, New Jersey, participating in a photographic portrait exhibit of Holocaust survivors. A woman stopped by my portrait and introduced herself as Barbara. I noticed that she had a British accent. I asked where she was from, and she replied "from England." I then told her about my stay in England in 1946. She asked me the name of the family in Leeds whom I had stayed with. I told her Dr. David Abel and his family. She looked very surprised and told me that he was her Uncle David. She told me that Dr. Abel and Helen had died, but Mrs. Abel was still alive; she was ninety-five then. I gave her my email that she promised to send to her cousin Judie Abel who was born a year after I left in 1947.

In an email, Judie, the Abels' daughter, told me the following story: "All our lives we have had two teaspoons and two cake forks—we called these the Dutch cake forks and spoons—which were brought as a gift when refugee girls came to our house." Rita and I had given the silverware to her family. The reason we gave the silverware to them is that we had nothing else to give them to show our appreciation for their hospitality. My parents had buried the silver service during the war when they knew that they were going into hiding.

Judie and I planned a meeting because I would be in Israel with a group of teachers from the U.S. I had some questions about that time that I thought Judie may know the answers to. I asked how I had communicated with the Abels because I had known very little English. Judie explained that her mother had been born in Austria and spoke German, and I spoke Dutch, which is somewhat similar, so that is how we communicated. When I visited Israel, I also met Jillian, the oldest sister; however, she didn't remember me. Helen, the middle sister, and her dad, Dr. Abel, had passed away. It was decided that in July 2010, we would have a reunion near the nursing facility where Mrs. Abel was living. Before that July, I received an email from Judie that her mother had passed away, so I never again met with Mrs. Abel.

Chapter Fourteen

Deciding about Emigration

In the fall of 1947, my parents decided that they wanted to leave Amersfoort and move to Amsterdam where my dad had his business. By the time we moved to Amsterdam, I had caught up to the fifth grade and resumed regular school.

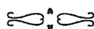
In 1947 when my father had decided that he wanted to live in Amsterdam, we were able to exchange houses with another family. We had to exchange houses rather than buy; because of the bombings during the war, there was a scarcity of houses. In Amsterdam, we lived in an area called the River Quarter; all the streets were named after rivers. Our apartment was on Deltastraat in a three story building next door to a famous twelve story building, Amsterdam's first skyscraper, known as *De Wolkenkrabber*, designed by J.F.Staal in 1932. This was the same complex where Anne Frank had lived at Merwedeplein 37/2.[18]

In the meantime, Dad's best friend, Uncle Nico Coster, who had survived Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, returned. He was horribly emaciated and sickly looking. When he returned from Bergen-Belsen, he lived with us. In 1947, he told us he was going to America to see what it was like. He said that he had friends in the U.S., people he had met in Bergen-Belsen who had immigrated to the U.S. He said that after he

had been there for a while, he would tell my parents how the U.S. was. So Uncle Nico traveled to the U.S. but didn't like it. He decided that he would not immigrate to America. When Uncle Nico returned, he brought back bags of clothes. In one of the bags was a dress that I loved; it was a soft green color with a yellow GS on the collar. We thought that the GS was a girl's initials. We thought about her and wondered about her life. My mother turned the collar and the initials were gone. After we immigrated, I saw many of these dresses in the U.S. The dress was a Girl Scout uniform.

My dad's business was by then doing well. However, by early 1949, my parents had decided that they wanted to move farther than Amsterdam; they wanted to emigrate from the Netherlands. For them, especially for my mother, there were too many sad memories in the Netherlands. I remember, after the war, when my mother received a letter from the Dutch Red Cross. Mother opened the letter, read it, and started crying. The letter informed her that her parents and my father's family had been murdered in Sobibor Death Camp. She already knew they weren't coming back; however, this letter finalized their deaths.

Chapter Fifteen



Post-War Amersfoort

After we had settled somewhat in Amersfoort, Dad went to claim his father's restaurant. It had been damaged during the war. A Dutch Nazi who had been running it told my father to prove that he owned the restaurant. My father could not prove this because all wills and other documents had been burnt by my mother before we went into hiding. To earn money, my father began to sell cigarettes from the house. Also Dad got a job with the Dutch government in agriculture, something about chickens. His cigarette business grew, so he fixed up our kiosk at the train station and re-opened it, selling cigarettes, cigars, and newspapers.

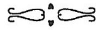
In 1947 or 1948, Dad ventured into a new business; he started a textile import company, Zijwol (*zij*=silk; *wol*=wool). He sold these textiles to stores. At that time, ready-made clothes could not be purchased, so our clothing was sewn. By now he had a car and could drive to Amsterdam where he had an office on the Heerengracht (Gentleman's Canal).[17]

My parents also did volunteer work. They had responded to the government's call for Dutch volunteers to take care of the graves at Cemetery Rusthof. The Rusthof cemetery is the largest cemetery that services Amersfoort. Therefore, it is often called Amersfoort General Cemetery or Amersfoort (Old

Leusden) Cemetery. Cemetery Rusthof is a partly civilian, partly military cemetery. Some victims of the World War II are buried there, including 238 soldiers and pilots killed in action from the British Commonwealth, Poland, Belgium and France. Canada alone lost 7,600 soldiers. Some airmen had been captured when their planes had been shot down near Amersfoort. Also in the cemetery were World War II military victims from Yugoslavia, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Portugal, Czechoslovakia, and Italy, as well as 865 soldiers from the Soviet Union. A number of the Soviet dead came from nearby Kamp Amersfoort where they had been POWs.

My parents tended, among others, the grave of an airman named Bannerman from New Zealand. Later someone from New Zealand who was visiting the cemetery said that he knew the airman. My mother asked for the airman's address and wrote to his parents.

Chapter Sixteen



Across the Ocean

Some of my mother's relatives had left Germany in the early 1930s when they saw Hitler's rise to power and his antisemitism. They immigrated to the U.S., to New York City. In 1948, they discovered that the four of us had survived the war and offered to sponsor us to come to the U.S.

Therefore, despite the success of my father's business, my parents decided that they were ready to immigrate to the U.S. They said that they wanted to do this for Rita and me.

My parents contacted the American embassy where they discovered that there was a quota. In the fall of 1949, our quota number was up;. however, there was one problem. My mother was a Dutch naturalized citizen—through marriage—and because she had been born in Saar Louis, they could not decide if she was German or French. The embassy finally agreed to let her come under the Dutch quota. Then we had to go for a physical. My parents were on separate papers, and Rita came on my parents' papers. Because I would become eighteen during the waiting time to become U.S. citizens (there was a five-year residency required), I was on a separate paper.

Once we decided to leave, we wondered how we would tell Tannie Spronk in Oldebroek. Rita and I had spent all our vacations with her; she was so very special to us. Tannie passed

away on January 1, 1950 (my dad's birthday) and we left for the U.S. in April 1950; therefore, we never had to tell Tannie that we were leaving.

When our papers came through, we left very quickly. Because we were not allowed to transfer money out of the Netherlands, Mother used our savings to buy all new furniture, which she had shipped.

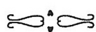
My mother thought that we should fly to the U.S. rather than to take a ship. To see if we would like flying, we went to the Amsterdam Schiphol Airport and took an excursion flight over Amsterdam. No one but my mother liked the flight; therefore, we booked passage on the MS *Westerdam*, of the Holland American line.[19] We left on April 14, 1950. The voyage took ten days. For my mother and sister, the crossing was terrible because of the April storms and being seasick. My dad and I, however, were not seasick. During the voyage, my father told us that we had to learn all the states and their capitals. Rita and I knew no English, although our parents could speak and understand a little English. When we finally entered New York Harbor, we missed the Statue of Liberty because when the ship was passing it, we were down with the public health officials who had boarded the ship to check our X-rays and to check us for smallpox and diphtheria. We were very disappointed. Before the inspection, we did see Brooklyn and Staten Island. We disembarked at the Holland American pier in Hoboken on April 24, 1950, not at Ellis Island.[20]

The relatives who sponsored us—Dr. Samuel Eschwege and his family and Dr. Leo Hess—were there to welcome

us. They took us to New York City. We had heard about the skyscrapers, and we had our first glimpse of these during our trip from Hoboken, New Jersey, to New York City. Our relatives had arranged a room in a rooming house on West 101 Street and Broadway. We shared the bathroom and kitchen facilities with other people who roomed there. There was a little grocery across the street where Rita and I bought loads of bananas and white bread and made delicious sandwiches. Both were real delicacies for us.

Dad had a job in Ashville, North Carolina, at the Biltmore Hotel, as a waiter, so he left for Ashville. As an immigrant to the U.S., it was required that the head of the household have a job. Our relatives had secured this job for him in Ashville. We would follow him once he was settled.

Chapter Seventeen



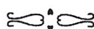
Settling In

Dad soon returned from Ashville, which he did not like. The family got him another job as busboy at the Astor Hotel on Times Square. He graduated to waiter and then to desk clerk. In June of 1950, we were able to rent an apartment in Kew Garden Hills in Queens, New York. Our furniture, dishware, and silverware had been shipped from the Netherlands and arrived in the U.S. Among the furniture were heavy wardrobes. In Europe there were few built in closets, so people put their clothing into wardrobes. This furniture was too bulky and cumbersome for our apartment; therefore, my mother gave it away.

We started school at PS 154 in the middle of June 1950. At fourteen-years-old, I was placed in the fourth grade because I could not speak English. The desk was much too small. I first read picture books. There were a lot of differences—the language, of course, was a big one. My name was pronounced differently. Math was done differently.

However, we were helped tremendously by Dr. Moses, the elementary school principal, who took such an interest in Rita and me. He advised my parents to take away all our Dutch books and speak only English to us. Then we were off all summer! All summer! For 25¢ we could go to Parsons Movie

Chapter Twenty



Educating Youth

Since 1982, when I became a member of The New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education, I have devoted my life to Holocaust and genocide education as well as to public service. Initially I was reluctant to deal with my painful past; however, I had come to realize the importance of witnessing to others about my Holocaust experiences. I remember that on March 29, 1981, a week after CBS had featured a story on Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who had saved many Jewish lives in Budapest, Hungary, CBS *60 minutes,* followed up the feature reading some letters from viewers. One letter was signed by an Annandale, New Jersey, neighbor with whom I was acquainted. The paragraph shown on TV was the following: "The Jews of Europe were not exterminated in gas chambers. The gas chambers were war time propaganda fantasies." I realized then that I could no longer be silent about what I had experienced. I was sure that there were many more Sophies in the world, people who were denying what had happened during the Holocaust and even that the Holocaust had happened at all.

In 1982, when The New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education was being formed, I spoke about the silence of child survivors. My presentation was based on the writings of Robert

Krell, M.D., a child survivor and a psychiatrist:

> Years of life beyond certain death—Who would have thought that we would live to see this day, given such overwhelming odds? For most of those years child survivors have lived in silence. Silence served us well while in hiding. Survival so often depended on not being noticed, on being inconspicuous, on the ability to suppress tears and ignore pain. Grief was borne in silence, so was rage. Silence is the language of the child survivor. We might have talked after the war, but adults persuaded us to get on with life, to forget the past. Adults, themselves Holocaust survivors, inadvertently diminished the experiences of child survivors. In the aftermath, in that silence which enveloped our existence, what needed saying was not said.

For a long time, I couldn't talk about my experiences; I was silent. However, sharing my story has helped me to become the person I am today. I often serve as a volunteer speaker, relating my memories of the Holocaust because I want to ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust are remembered. The best way to do this is by my teaching students to accept differences through learning about my story of sacrifice, loss, and survival. I visit many schools to teach young people what happens when citizens of a country are stripped of their civil rights. I've seen

horrible atrocities, things I can't even talk about, but I've also seen people, Christians like the families who saved my family, who risked their lives to save us. I have dedicated many days to educating students as well as juvenile offenders.

Anti-bullying is one of the subjects that I speak about. This relates very well to what happened during the Holocaust. The Nazis as well as their collaborators throughout Europe began as bullies and from there evolved into murderers.

In addition to presentations to students and community groups, I accompany educators on The New Jersey Holocaust Commission-sponsored summer study tours to Europe to Holocaust-related sites, such as The Anne Frank House, Vught Labor Camp, Westerbork Transit Camp, and Auschwitz – Birkenau Concentration Camp. On these study tours I share my experiences as a child in hiding, praising the courageous behavior of my rescuers, the Spronks and the Westerinks. Jo Westerink Van Gulik, the daughter of the family in Elburg, is still alive. Jo welcomes the group and me when we visit the Netherlands and retrace my journey from Amersfoort to Oldebroek and Elburg. On August 1, 2014, in the Netherlands, Jo (Frederica von Gulik-Westerink) and her parents, Jacob and Henriette Westerink, were honored as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Museum. The Spronks will be honored at a ceremony in November 2014 at the Hague.

As a member of the Interstate Migrant Education Council of New Jersey (IMEC) that I chaired in 1998 and 2000, I championed educational rights for children of migrant

workers.[21] Moreover, I dedicated seven years as a member of my local school board, North Hunterdon/Voorhees High School, and twenty-four years as a member of the New Jersey State Board of Education, where I served as vice president and president. In 1995, I was elected President of the National Association of State Boards of Education. My dedication to public education stems from my years of having been denied an education during WWII. I want today's children to have a quality public education, something that was forbidden for me during the war years. However, on May 12, 2012, I was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws for my Holocaust activities by the College of Saint Elizabeth in Convent Station, New Jersey. I was delighted to receive the honorary doctorate but most honored by the words on the certificate: "Maud Dahme for extraordinary moral courage as a leader and passionate educator of Holocaust education is awarded the degree of Doctor of Laws—*Honoris Causa*."

My story of my life as a hidden child received a national telling in 2006 when *The Hidden Child*, a one-hour documentary was broadcast on PBS. Matt Schuman, in "Beyond Hate," explains:

> A gripping tale of survival, *The Hidden Child* tells the story of a six-year-old girl and her sister, separated from their parents, dodging bullets, lying for survival, and relying on the compassion of strangers who risked their own lives to save Jewish children. Of the 1,600,000 Jewish children

who lived in Europe before World War II, only 100,000 survived the Holocaust. Most were hidden children, shuttered away in attics, cellars, convents or in villages or farms. . . . Dahme was one of the estimated 3,000 to 8,000 Jewish children in the Netherlands who were hidden and saved from the Nazi death camps by courageous Christians. Today, Dahme devotes her life to the Holocaust and genocide education. Issues such as tolerance, mutual respect and understanding are explored in depth in the documentary.