

# Chapter Three



## Rescued

My family was not deported. Soon, however, we were in danger of losing more than our schooling. My mother remembers that in July 1942, the whole synagogue congregation where we belonged was summoned to the synagogue where a letter from the German *Kommandant* was read. This letter told the Jews of Amersfoort that they would be resettled in the East, away from the war scene. The fathers would have jobs and the children would go to school. The letter gave all the details: the dates we were to leave from the train station and the list of what we could take. It stated that we should bring money and jewelry but that we should not worry about our homes. We should just lock the doors, and the Germans would watch over our belongings until we returned. *Of course after we left, the Germans confiscated all our belongings. After we had left, we found out that the neighbors could have bought some of our things; nonetheless, my parents left everything and lost everything. After they left, the house was "pulsed"; Pulse was a Dutch Moving Company that the Nazis used to pick up the possessions of the Jews who had been deported or gone into hiding.*

*Some items such as photographs were returned to us by Christian friends. Also valuable items were buried, and after the war we were able to recover them.*

Soon after they heard about the *Kommandant's* letter, my parents stopped by Mr. Kees van Zwol's house; they had to sneak into this friend's home because of the Nazi restrictions on visiting anyone non-Jewish. My parents told me that they were surprised to see that he had a copy of the *Kommandant's* letter on his desk. My mother was curious. She thought that either he was working with the Underground or he was a Dutch Nazi—of which there were thousands. She asked him why he had the letter. He explained to my mother that he was working with the Dutch resistance.

My parents then asked him, "What do you think we should do?"

He replied, "I don't think you should go on that train."

My parents again asked, "What should we do?"

He said, "We have been going all over the Netherlands asking Christian families, if the need arises, to take in Jewish children. Children are our first priority. We have addresses for Jewish children. We have been able to get an address for your children. Presently, we don't have an address for you. We cannot tell you who your children will be hidden with. We cannot tell you where they will be hidden. We cannot tell you anything because if you are caught and tortured, you will not be able to reveal anything. You have to decide by tomorrow. Let me know your decision."

*As a parent, I now realize how hard it must have been for my parents to make that decision to hand their children over to total strangers. It would be heart-wrenching.*

My parents discussed this proposal and decided it would

be the best thing to do. They realized too that they may never see Rita and me again. Mr. van Zwol contacted the rescuer and told my parents that they had agreed. He then told them to bring the children to a house in the neighborhood the next morning. My parents told us that we were going on a vacation to a farm for several weeks. They said that we would see animals. They told us that they also were going on a vacation and when they came back they would pick us up. We were very excited to be visiting a farm because we lived in the city!

The next morning we rode our tricycles to the neighborhood home. Dad brought us to the house of this family. He told us, "Wait here. Don't go inside the garden gate yet." He gave us our little bags and said, "We'll see you in several weeks. Take good care of your sister, Maud." Even though I was only six years old, I took my father's words to heart and watched carefully over Rita, then four years old. Father left, taking our tricycles back to our house.

We were left with the Jan Kanis family in July 1942. Rita and I were the first Jewish children in his home. We had dinner with the Kanis family and were put to bed. They woke us in the middle of the night and told us to get dressed. We left their house at around 4:00 AM and walked through the woods with flashlights.

I remember walking through the woods and picking blueberries that were growing wild on the ground. By daylight we had reached the next town, Nijkerk, where we took the train. If we had taken the train from Amersfoort, we would surely have been recognized because we were well known around our

train station; my grandfather's and father's businesses were at this train station.

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As an adult, I learned more about Jan Kanis. The following is from Yad Vashem's Righteous Among the Nations. Yad Vashem is the Israeli Holocaust museum in Jerusalem.

*Jan Kanis was born on December 25, 1900, in Oldebroek. In 1920, he began working for the Dutch Post Office, first in Harderwijk and later in Amsterdam. In 1927, Jan married Petronella Paans from Ermelo. In 1932, he became the postmaster at Oldebroek. From May 1935 to May 9, 1940, the Kanis family lived in Oldebroek until their home was expropriated and annexed to the adjacent military base. On May 9, they moved to Amersfoort where Kanis continued to work for the Post Office. Kanis's work with the Dutch Underground began in July 1942. Kanis had read a letter from Germany, directed to Standesamt, informing them that three Jews from Elburg, two sisters and their brother, had died of pneumonia. Kanis knew this family and did not believe this; he believed that they had been murdered. He then realized that some of the so-called labor camps were in fact death camps.*

*Kanis then began to collect addresses of people who were willing to hide Jews. Not everyone was willing to risk his or her life to hide total strangers.*



*But, despite, this fear, Kanis found many people who immediately agreed. When the Jews of Amersfoort were notified to go to the train station for deportation, he tried to hide them. Some Jews, however, did not want to leave friends and family to go into hiding.*

*In addition to Rita and me, Kanis also took in my teacher Eva Schnell and her husband, Alfred. He brought us and the Schnells to Oldebroek.*

*On February 11, 1944, Kanis was part of a failed robbery attempt of a German distribution center. When he went to the safe house, the Nazis were waiting and Kanis was arrested. On May 24, he was transported to Vught Concentration Camp in the Netherlands and from Vught to Dachau Concentration Camp in southern Germany. On June 18, 1944, he was transported from Dachau to Natzweiler-Struthof Concentration Camp in the Alsace-Lorraine area of eastern France where forced laborers worked in quarries, in munitions factories, and on construction of underground facilities. In March 1945, prisoners, among them Jan Kanis, were sent ahead of the advancing Allies on a death march to Dachau. On April 29, 1945, the day U.S. soldiers liberated Dachau, Kanis weighed only seventy-nine pounds. He had typhus and was close to death. He was hospitalized for six weeks until he regained his strength.*

*One of his daughters, Alida, who was seventeen years-old, had taken up his cause. She too was betrayed but survived. in 1970, Jan Kanis was recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous among the Nations. His wife Nel (Petronella) was also recognized.*

—From Yad Vashem

## Chapter Four



### The Spronk Farm

Jan Kanis left us on a farm in Oldebroek with Mr. and Mrs. Spronk, Kobameuje and Hendrik, who were in their sixties and had no children. Mrs. Spronk's brother, Evert Flier, lived with them. He was a deaf mute and used a trumpet-hearing aid that we yelled into so he could hear us. He had a little building on the side of the house where he made wooden shoes.

The farm was located on a major highway. In the back of the farm were meadows. The area was very poor; these were hard times. The farm had no running water or toilet. We used an outhouse and water pump.

The first day we were there the Spronks made us hide in the wheat field because German soldiers were walking around. I wasn't scared because they told us we were playing a game—hide and seek. We had just arrived and already had to hide! They gave me a black umbrella in case of rain. We then zigzagged through the wheat. The wheat was very high because it was August but the wheat had not yet been harvested. It started to rain, so I opened the umbrella. You could see the umbrella for miles. Rita started crying, wanting her "mommie." So between the crying and the umbrella, the Spronks decided to take us back into the house. That evening a couple of relatives came over to meet us. I don't recall the conversation other than

my telling them, "I am so grownup that I can wear the yellow star. And I know how to spell and write my name."

After the relatives left, the couple took me aside. That very first night they told me why they were concerned.

# Chapter Five



## New Lives

During that first night on the farm, the Spronks talked to us about our names and our stories. I knew my name, but they changed it. I was now Margje (Margie); my sister, Rika. They said that our last names were now their last name—Spronk. We had to call the Spronks, Aunt and Uncle; him Oom and her Tante. Rita, however, could not say Tante but said Tannie instead, so we called her Tannie.

Then they said that this is your story, and you must remember it: “You are our nieces. Your family was bombed out of the city. You were homeless but now are living with us. You are no longer Jewish. You are now Christian. You have to remember this! If you do not remember this correctly, the German soldiers will take us all away.”

A decision was made that we could not attend school. They were afraid that we might reveal something about our previous life to one of our classmates whose parents might be a Dutch Nazi. Our story was drilled into me every single day. I lived in constant fear; I was scared to death, knowing that if I messed up, we would all be taken away. Rita and I were now *Onderduikers* (literally: under divers, or underground), the name given to Dutch people who were hiding from the Nazis. The German edict was that anyone hiding Jews would suffer

the same fate as the Jews. For a six and half year old child, this was really scary and overwhelming.

On the highway in front of the farm, there were no cars except military traffic and the Roma's ("Gypsies") wooden carts. When we were first there, we saw the Roma a lot. The adults warned us, "They steal children." We ran like the wind whenever we saw them coming. According to Kathryn D. Carlisle:

The legend that Gypsies steal children is one of the many myths burdening Roma today. Roma themselves know the truth: for at least the past two hundred years, non-Romani state, church and charity authorities have been stealing Romani children from Romani families and remanding them into institutional care. This problem is today particularly widespread in Italy and instances of taking Romani children from their parents in Italy seem to be increasing.

Later I remembered that these Roma used to ask for our cats. They were very hungry. So like many Dutch, the Gypsies killed and ate cats and dogs because there was very little food available during the war, especially towards the end of the war.

In addition to the troop movement, the Nazis had placed a huge anti-aircraft gun in the back of the farm. One morning Rita and I went outside to get the eggs the chickens had laid. We saw German soldiers sitting at an anti-aircraft gun. Rita went up to them and asked them if she could shoot the gun.

They told her, "You're too little. Wait until you are older." Rita did not realize the danger of conversing with the German soldiers, as I did. This really frightened me.

We saw a lot of German soldiers walking around. We could have been stopped and questioned at any time. I learned recently that most of the villagers knew who we were but never disclosed our identity until after the war.

Rita was young, so she didn't understand. Therefore, at first, we had to stay in the house most of the time until I learned my new name and story. In the beginning the only time we went out was to go to church on Sundays. On a recent visit, I met a woman who had lived on the farm next door. She told me that my sister and I used to come over to her house to see her baby. When I left, she would ask me, "Do you remember who you are?"

The Spronks were deeply religious. So we too were brought up by the Spronks to be very religious. We read the Bible every night and went to church every Sunday. We began to forget our Jewish religion. In the beginning, I knew that Rita and I were Jewish, and I knew that Jews were being hidden. By the end of the war, I remembered nothing about my Jewish upbringing.

In preparation for Sunday church, on Saturday night before bed, we would get a bath in a big wooden tub in the barn attached to the house. The water was heated, and we used the same water to wash ourselves. I remember that once we got lice in our long hair. I remember so well because they cut our hair. They put a paper on the floor, combing out as many lice

as they could. Then they covered our hair in powder and then put a kerchief around our head. I found out much later that the powder was DDT.<sup>8</sup>

After church one Sunday, Tannie and Oom took us on the back of their bikes to visit Tannie's widowed sister, the Widow Blaauw, who lived on another farm. There I found my former kindergarten teacher from Amersfoort, Eva Schnell, and her husband, Alfred. That was so very exciting! Someone who knew us.

Every Sunday after church, we went to see them. Mrs. Schnell was teaching us to read and write. Then she and her husband disappeared; I never saw them again.

I learned what had happened to them much later, long after the war was over. The Widow Blaauw, Eva, and Alfred were betrayed to the *Moffe* (Germans).<sup>9</sup> The Dutch were given money for uncovering hidden Jews, so there was literally a price on our heads.

On October 3, 1944, there was a *razzia* (Dutch: search and round-up); German soldiers arrived on Widow Blaauw's farm. The German soldiers searched the farm house and then went to the haystack which was under a metal roof to keep the hay dry. This was where my teacher Eva Schnell and her husband, Alfred, were hiding. Obviously the soldiers already knew that Jews were hiding there. The German soldiers had been very polite while searching the farm house, but when they discovered my teacher and her husband in the haystack, they kicked and cursed them. The soldiers also raised havoc on the farm beheading a pig and just leaving it there.



Because the widow was hiding Jews, they told her that, instead of her, they would take her son, Jan. That same day four others were also taken prisoner in the neighborhood: Cornelius Bakker, Albert Brouwer, Hans Marius Koopal and Jacob Koorn.

Widow Blaauw's son was ordered to take all six prisoners in a horse drawn cart to a neighboring town, Zwolle. He also was held captive there. After a few weeks his father, Gerrit, bribed the German *Kommandant* with a side of bacon, and Jan was released.

My teacher, her husband, and the four men were paraded through Zwolle bound together with rope. They arrived at a park, called *Het Engelse Werk* (The English Style Park). There they were given shovels and ordered to dig three holes. There they were shot, two by two into each freshly dug grave.

By accident, on 17 February 1944, during construction in the park the bodies of the six were discovered. The German *Kommandant* then transported the six bodies to the transit Kamp Westerbork, where they were buried.

*On October 4, 2001 a monument was unveiled to the six murdered on October 3, 1944. The monument, a small column of dolomite, is located in "Het Engelse Werk," the park in Zwolle where they were shot.<sup>10</sup> The text on the pedestal reads as follows:*

*Shot on 3 OKTOBER 1944*

CORNELIS BAKKER 15-05-1922

ALBERT BROUWER 09-07-1919

HANS MARIUS KOOPAL 15-08-1920

JACOB KOORN 04-11-1922

ALFRED SCHNELL 10-06-1900

EVA SCHNELL-JOLOWICZ 19-11-1913.

# Chapter Six



## Living on the Farm

As city children, life on the farm was especially interesting. We were allowed to help on the farm. During the wheat harvest, we went out to the fields where they were cutting the wheat and hay with a scythe or a sickle. After it was cut, we would help to stack the wheat that was then put on carts and taken to the windmill in town where the wheat was made into flour.

We also had to collect the aluminum foil from the meadows and wheat fields. During the war, the Allies threw down pieces of aluminum foil as “anti-radar chaff,” which, according to “History of Aluminum Foil,” were “dropped from planes on bombing missions, as a radar shield.” This upset the farmers because their cows were grazing in the meadows and the foil’s dropping crazed their cows. The planes threw out anti-Nazi booklets as well. The cows didn’t seem to mind those.

During the war, I was taught to spin the wool they had sheared from the sheep. They first sheared and then washed and dried the wool. After I spun the wool, they washed it again, and then they taught me how to knit underpants for Rita and me from this raw wool. Those were so scratchy and very uncomfortable. Thanks to the Spronks, I have been knitting since I was six and a half years old. *Because of knitting at such*

*a young age, it grew into a hobby. I still knit for myself and my family—sweaters, mittens, scarfs, and hats.* I also always had a supply of wooden shoes because Tannie's brother, Oom Evert, made wooden shoes.

Our clothing, however, was still the clothing we had initially brought from home; it just got tighter and tighter as we grew and was eventually replaced with hand-me-downs from other children.

I remember one night the village men were going to slaughter a pig. The Germans had confiscated many of the farmers' cows and pigs to feed their troops. The whole neighborhood turned out for the pig slaughter. Usually they would let the pig die slowly by letting it bleed out. They would put the pig on a ladder and then butcher it, but this time they had to shoot the pig. They could not risk the Germans hearing the pig's squealing. Every family was given a piece of the meat. Rita and I wanted the bladder, so we could dry it out and blow it up like a balloon. We didn't have any toys, so the bladder was a toy to play with.

I also went around and found the spent ammunition they had used to shoot down planes. I played with that. I put the ammunition on a shelf in the barn. I showed this after the war to my father. The poor man almost had a heart attack. Apparently some of the munitions, such as grenades, were live.

Aunt and Uncle were very nice to us. A few years ago I met a woman who was related to her. Because Tannie never had children, she didn't know how to take care of us. The woman had to show her how to bathe us.

On the evening of January 20, 1944, we had just returned to the farm after visiting a neighbor. Oom was standing in front of his closet taking off his jacket when he grabbed his heart, collapsed to the floor in front of me, and died. I was very frightened. The custom was to lay out the body in the living room/bedroom for five days so people could pay their last respects. So Oom was kept in the house for five days in an open casket. Because his eyes were open, coins were put on his eyes to keep them closed. On January 24, 1944, my eighth birthday, Oom was buried.

When uncle died, the Underground sent word to Tannie that she could not keep us. Her second nephew, Gerrit, his wife, Dirkje, and baby Helmig came to live with us, so they could help to run the farm. Tannie told the Underground: "I am keeping the children until after the war when their parents return. If their parents don't return, I will raise them."

I remember that same month, when I was at the farm, copying a letter in pencil to my parents. Someone wrote in pencil, and I traced over the words in ink. Once the ink was dry, we erased the pencil marks. Here is the translation:

January 1944

Dear Mommy and Daddy,

We like it here very much. We want to be free.

I also would very much like to see you when I come back. I help Tannie with milking the cows.

I want to become a farmer girl. The teacher is giving us lessons. I can read a little bit already. I am sleeping by Meurie, a neighbor, and Rita is

sleeping with Tannie. Uncle has died. I will write more later.

Good-bye, so long,  
Margje and Rika Spronk

This letter was delivered to my parents via the Underground. *My mother saved this letter and gave it to me many years later. This letter can be seen at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.*

The Underground through Kees van Zwol brought our ration coupons from Amersfoort. While they were in hiding, our parents had heard that we were okay. A man saw Rita and me walking along a road. This man somehow ran into my mother. He told her that he had seen her daughters. He had recognized us. This news both pleased and worried my mother who feared we would be betrayed to the Nazis.