

Jan Heijnen's wartime adventures in our neighbourhood

The editors of the Koerier are always happy to receive contributions to this publication. This one was written by Jan Heijnen, born in 1928. Before the Second World War, he lived in the premises of the laundry on the Haringkade, at the place where Madurodam is located at present. He describes it as a children's paradise. He later emigrated to Canada, and wrote his story for his son there. Since a fair number of our neighbours are expats, we thought this description of war time events in our area might be of interest to them and of course to other younger people. The article was edited and shortened, we kept only the parts relevant to our neighbourhood.

From 1928 till 1940, the laundry on the Haringkade

This story is based on actual facts and events as recollected and experienced by myself. It's also the history of my parents (Jan and Nel Heijnen), two brothers and a sister and close relations. We all went through the war years which changed everybody's life completely.

I shall now give an idea of how we were situated. My father and his brothers operated a fairly large laundry and dry-cleaning business which was founded by my great-grandfather in the late 19th century. He was involved in French-made laundry machinery named Laval from Paris, and was the representative in our area in Holland, and made his fortune doing so. The location where all this occurred is close to the "white bridge" (Wittebrug). It was a rather wooded area between the city of The Hague and Scheveningen. The building itself was located on an elevated sandy plot of land of approximately 100x200 metres.

The layout was square with a large inner court where the 4 trucks could enter the building to unload and also load for delivery to our customers. There were storage sheds, washrooms and a lunchroom facility for employees, changing rooms, and a bike shed.

A large steam engine was the power source for the entire plant. It drove all the large washing machines and pumped the water out of our own well (the water consumption was approximately 250 000 litres/day) and generated our own electricity during normal operating hours. The steam then was used to create the large amounts of hot water needed in the laundry.

Our living quarters were above the front of the building and divided in two halves. The west wing was occupied by our family, and the east wing by my father's two bachelor brothers. The long hallway (20 metres) was the ideal playing area for our toy railway setup and also used as shooting alley with the "BB" gun and pistol. Behind the building there was a tennis court and a large lawn and flower garden.

The 2 storage water basins (250 000l each) were great to play at with small toy boats.

Oh-boy, did I have good times.

BUT ! On MAY 10 1940 the WAR started for Holland with the Germans invading the country. This was the beginning of a totally different era that lasted 5 full years, until we were liberated by the Canadian Armed Forces.

May 1940 till May 1945

In May 1940 I was 11 years old. I shall try to give my best recollection of what our family experienced. In the early morning hours of May 10 1940 there were planes everywhere in the sky. We went up to the roof of the house, not realizing how dangerous that was, and suddenly I saw bombs being dropped on the military barracks approximately 2 km from our place. All hell broke loose and from the radio we knew we were at war! The first day anti-aircraft guns downed 100 German planes, and over the four days 400+ were destroyed. None of the Dutch

fighter planes survived the battle. When the bombs started to rain on Rotterdam we knew it was a lost battle, and the Dutch surrendered.

During the occupation a large number of officials and intellectuals were rounded up and taken as hostages, and every time the underground had done some sabotage work some of the hostages were shot. The place where this was done (Waalsdorpervlakte) was close to where we lived and we could hear the machine guns in the early morning hours. But we came to know this only later, at the time we did not realize what was going on. The regular German army was very disciplined and did not harass the Dutch people in the street, at least the first year and a half. When the war took a turn and the Germans started losing, life became quite different!

To give a good impression of the happenings in those five years, one would have to write a book, so I shall again stick to my personal experiences. A lot of things have happened that changed the life and circumstances of my family completely.

Very soon after the occupation of Holland, the German air force started to fly from various Dutch airfields to bomb England. In my mind I can still see the hordes of two engine bombers flying over where we lived or saw them in the distance going west. We knew that this was devastating for the places where these air-raids were heading for, because we could listen to the BBC, and hear about some of the places being hit and how many planes were shot down. In the beginning it was disappointing to see no English fighter or bomber planes, but after two years this became a different story. Especially during the night, the searchlights and anti-aircraft guns with the tracer bullets created a spectacular scene. It was very noisy.

The loss of the family laundry business

By 1942 the Germans started to drastically reinforce their defences in the coastal zone, and to build concrete bunkers. A moat was dug, wooden posts were put in the fields around it. Unfortunately the Laundry business was just 150 metres inside the planned defence zone. If my memory serves me right, on October 3 1942 two German officers came into the laundry's office and my father and his two brothers were told to vacate the premises within "TWO" days. This seemed impossible, but we had good people working for us and we had the trucks to move the most valuable items to a warehouse in The Hague. The impact of these events on my father and mother was devastating, and also on my father's brothers. The second day I went to the other side of the canal on the front of the building and saw my childhood environment being demolished.

After a while my Mother found a house via connections in Wassenaar. We lived there during the remainder of the war and some years thereafter.

Latter part of the war

In 1944 the allied forces advanced to the rivers Maas & Rhine, but unfortunately the breakthrough at Arnhem failed in September of that year. All food was rationed and obtainable by coupons only, but not much was to be had. As the war drew on the problem of food became worse by the day.

There was no cat, dog or rat to be seen.

My sister Els and I tried to do some "barter" business by exchanging soap for food articles. People became very inventive, like making mini stoves which you could put on a regular stove and use the chimney draft to let the smoke out, but this was enough for a small pot and the fuel was small twigs from trees. Believe it or not, this way I fried the little birds I caught. I myself have eaten tulip bulbs, which had a devastating effect on your stomach.

A highlight that occurred was that with the food shortage the International Red Cross had organized with the German command and the Allied Command to allow food to be flown in to pre-arranged areas round Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam. At that time I was a member of the Air Raid Guard organization, which meant that in case of an air raid we would assist in confining damage to civilian property by extinguishing fires, dig out wounded, etc. We were chosen to man the dropping areas. The one I was involved with was at the Race Track between Wassenaar and The Hague. Of course we were not so sure this would materialize, but it did. When the first wave of planes came over, with their bomb-bay's open, out came the goodies, mainly paratrooper rations and huge cartons with large cans of biscuits, Rowntree chocolate, cans of bacon, corned-beef, egg powder etc. It was "manna from heaven" including toilet paper and cigarettes.

Finally, the day had come that the Germans capitulated and the war was over. The Canadian forces that liberated us were welcomed with open arms, and very soon law and order was reinstated.

Appendix

The above summary of events over this period was very much condensed and rather as seen through the eyes of the writer. It is important to include circumstances like the era of the depression in the thirties which was then a very difficult time for every business, including that of my father and his brothers. With hard work and the right measures taken, the business survived and was looking prosperous. There were plans in the making for complete modernization of the business, because the land was leased for 100 years and the deadline would come up in approximately 15 years...

The debacle of the war and what happened was devastating to my father. In the flu epidemic in 1918 his older brother Antoon had died. Then came the loss of the business and the worries during the war, with Toon in a labour camp, and my brother Jaap transferred to Limburg to finish his studies, and next to no communication with either of them.

Luckily, my mother was very strong willed and always tried to see the better side of things.

All in all, it was a time where everybody suffered one way or another. In our immediate family circle we were fortunate that no lives were lost, and the material loss, in comparison to what other families went through, was bearable. Life had to go on, no matter what!

The "Atlantikwall"

The defence system the Heijnen family had to leave their home and work for was the "Atlantikwall", built by the Germans in 1942-43 between Kijkduin and Wittebrug. It consisted of antitank obstacles, dragon's teeth and iron poles, as well the "Waterpartij" lake which was enlarged and deepened. To free the "field of fire" and allow a better view, a part of the forest (Scheveningse Bosjes) and eleven buildings were removed in our area. Between March 1943 and February 1944 a majority of inhabitants was evacuated from Scheveningen and the defence works bordering it. Our neighbourhood was more or less emptied, except for the houses used by Germans and an emergency hospital in what is now again the VCL high school.

Source A. Landheer-Roelants, Romantisch wonen... p42-45