THE SPIRIT IS VICTORIOUS: A FORGOTTEN WAR

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This story is dedicated to the memory of my mother Dory Wijbrans-Alers.

"Mommy, I'm thirsty, can I have a drink?"

"Not now sweetheart, as soon as we're home again." The young woman and the little girl are standing outside the large compound within the high wall covered with barbed wires. Hundreds of women and children are waiting in the tropical heat, surrounded by soldiers holding rifles with drawn bayonets. The razzia has been going on for hours...

"Mommy, Joline is thirsty too but she can't drink, can she?"

"No sweetheart she can't." The little girl holds up her doll.

"Joline can't drink because she has something in her tummy and..."

"Hush baby! Remember that's a little secret between you and me, we don't talk about it?" The woman speaks softly, the girl senses a trace of fear in her mother's voice, she becomes instantly quiet. Only four years old but she knows what danger means. Her doll Joline holds in her hollow inside the golden wedding ring of the mother and an amount of paper money...

On August 15, it will be 45 years since the occupation by the Japanese of the former Dutch East Indies ended. Each year we hear and read about large, often emotional commemorations of the liberation of Europe from the German occupation by the Allied Forces. Lest we forget . . . Four years ago the liberation of the former colony from the Japanese was finally officially included in the commemorations in The Netherlands. A forgotten war . . . And yet thousands of innocent people were involved, and many of them did not survive.

As a young child I spent almost four years in civilian internment camps on the island of Java in Indonesia. In March 1942 the Japanese army totally occupied the Dutch East Indies. The weak but heroic resistance had been crushed and Dutch military and civilians were put into camps. During this time my mother, like most women, was separated from her husband, who eventually went to a camp in Singapore. For years each had absolutely no idea where the other was and whether we were all still alive or not. Neither one of my parents gave up hope, both of them lived from day to day trusting the three of us would somehow survive this ordeal. Thank God, we did.

"banjoe biroe"

'Dear daddy, this is from Marieke. I hope daddy will soon be with us. I hope I will see daddy tomorrow. I am in the third reader and also I work in the third mathbook, but I don't have a workbook. When daddy is home again, will daddy buy me a workbook. Goodbye, dear daddy, a kiss from Marieke. Next time I shall do some math for you."

Over the past ten or fifteen years, bookshops in The Netherlands have offered a multitude of books about the occupation of Indonesia by the Japanese forces. Each year more are being published. It seems the Dutch, after more than thirty years, have digested their occupation by the Germans and suddenly an interest in what happened in the Far East has surfaced. Is it an interest on the part of the general public or did the survivors of the camps finally want to tell *their* story? After they returned to The Netherlands in 1946, the survivors tried to share their experiences with relatives and friends, but almost nobody, including the government, was willing to listen to them. The occupation by the Germans was too recent, the Dutch people simply couldn't deal with more horror

stories, and the Dutch East Indies had always been so far away. This resulted in feelings of resentment or bitterness with the majority of the repatriates, they quietly buried their stories, they firmly closed the chapter about the Japanese camps, many forever.

But it wasn't just for lack of interest that these stories could not be voiced: the Dutch population in general and the government in particular experienced at that time a certain national shame because The Netherlands had lost their former Dutch colony. The Dutch East Indies had been a part of Dutch history for centuries, and the way Indonesia finally became an independent nation did upset many people.

Do memories get stronger when one gets older? Why do I think about this short period in my life more often than twenty years ago? What do I really remember? Are my memories only a child's impression? I was very young, just three years old, when we were interned and seven when we finally boarded the ship that took us to The Netherlands. How much do I remember and how much is from hearsay? If only there was somebody I knew who could verify my stories...

"Simon says all *kodoks* fly..." (=frogs)
"Simon says all *klateks* fly..." (=sparrows)
Up go all the hands and the children laugh.
"Simon says all *cicaks* fly..." (=small lizards)

Slowly some hands go up but a big boy shouts, "No you dummies, *cicaks* don't fly! They cling to ceilings and walls with their feet." The teacher, an older woman, smiles. The kindergarten is held outdoors in the shade of a high wall, she can only teach the children songs and games. The lack of proper school materials prevents her from doing much else.

When the children get tired she settles them around her and tells them stories. This game is over and the children can have a drink of tepid, not quite clean, water from a bucket. Afterwards they have to use the "bathroom": a large chamberpot. The little girl stands at the end of the line because her last name starts with a "W". She hates that chamberpot, by the time it is her turn it's almost filled to capacity and no matter how carefully she tries to avoid it, her tiny bottom always gets wet and there's nothing to wipe it. Day after day she refuses to go, pretending she doesn't need to, risking a scolding from her mother because her panties are often wet.

I *do* remember. I have a sort of photographic memory; in my mind is stored a "box with pictures of the camp". Over the past years I have read some books and articles which my younger sister, born after the war, has sent to me. In one of these books *Mijn Reis* (My Voyage) by Mischa de Vreede, the author describes her journey back to Indonesia in 1980, her search for all the places of her childhood, including the camps. Disillusioned, she comes to the conclusion that these places no longer exist, life can't be turned back. With great difficulty she locates the exact spot of one camp, she finds a slum in which people and children live today under almost identical circumstances to those she experienced in the camp. The only difference is the absence of the high barbed wire fence surrounding the area.

In her book she mentions some typical behavioral patterns in people who, as a child, had to live in a camp. With increasing uneasiness I read a list of characteristics all applicable to me!

--I dislike standing in line, particularly for food. When I attend a buffet dinner I'm either the first or the last one to get my plate filled.

--In a sale I'm inclined to buy more than one of the same article. I always had the impression it was typical Dutch thrift that makes me do this. It is not, it is an unconscious impulse to stock up in case of another war.

--I hate crowds or noise. Whenever I am in a crowd or in a closed-in space I can

not relax. Noise can make me hysterical. The first thing I do upon entering a large room or theatre is check where the exits are. I prefer to stay close to a door and like to sit in an aisle seat. I have a great dislike for big gatherings. Period.

--Worse is the fact that I have difficulty tolerating authority, and like many dogs, I have a distinct dislike of uniforms. Most of the time I am a law abiding citizen till I am confronted by someone in uniform or when I have to deal with bureaucracy. Immediately all my hackles go up, I tend to become unnecessarily short tempered and rude, inclined to verbal abuse. It is awfully embarrassing, I don't understand my own behaviour, and I can't control it. I sense the uneasiness of my husband, but when he tries to reason with me I lash out at him as well. Afterwards I feel deeply ashamed. Luckily these confrontations don't happen often and I simply try to avoid uniforms. There is some relief and comfort to know now why I always act like this, why I feel these hostilities.

Between the very few mementoes I have from the camps, some of them my father sent me recently, is a collection of rhymes and prose, neither poems nor literature, written by women in our camps. My mother copied the ones that must have moved her most in her beautiful handwriting on scraps of paper. These lines describe in plain and simple words the enormous suffering and horrors of living in an internment camp; the cruelties of the Japanese soldiers, the hard labour, the shortage of food, sickness and death. Women stripped of every bit of privacy and dignity, and yet they never lost hope. In their daily misery they remained proud and strong women who prayed for and strongly believed in a speedy end of the war and a better world to come. Some of those lines I have tried to translate ...

How much longer, you asked me,
will we finally, really be free?
Things are alright the messages say,
the war appears for us to go O.K.
But the uncertainty, is it sure,
how much more do we have to endure?
We're sick and tired of this crazy war,
the road we have to go seems too far.
Hunger lives between our skin and bones,
we dream of chocolates and creamy scones.
We labour and slave in the field
but the crops and fruits they yield
aren't for us or for our little ones
but for our "benefactors", the Nippons!
In the heat of the sun we stand, heads bent deep,
in the night we patrol while others sleep.
We try to create a home on top of our bed,
we care for the sick and we bury our dead.
We have to speak the tongue of the rising sun,
often we simply can't get it all done...
We pray for a world in which man will be free,
a world without hunger, filled with humanity.
How long is this horrible war going to last?
Please dear God, let it end, let it end fast!

In March 1982, I visited with my sister an exhibition in The Hague: "The Dutch Indies in Wartime." This exhibition was supposed to be a permanent display in a museum, showing stories, pictures, films, clothing, utensils, crafts and what one may call souvenirs; most of these items were donated by the survivors of the camps. Due to budget cuts or a change of plan, this exhibition no longer exists. This visit became a far deeper emotional experience than I had anticipated, but I am glad I did go and see it all. It was a worthwhile experience, for at last I knew that my personal memories are largely correct and that they are indeed mine and not only from hearsay.

Upon leaving the exhibition I was asked to sign a guest book. "Why me?" I

asked. "You were there, weren't you? I couldn't help noticing your reactions." The young museum-guard offered me the pen. I was the first Canadian who signed the book.

After I returned to Canada I read another book, *Een dal in Ambarawa* (A Valley in Ambarawa) by Han Helffrich-Koch, a women of my mother's age, born about 1913. Her story is a detailed description of her ordeal in a camp close to the one my mother and I were in. She mentions our camp Banjoe Biroe once or twice, remarking in disbelief that the conditions in Banjoe Biroe seemed to have been worse than in Ambarawa. But what does worse mean here and what is better in so much suffering?

While I read this book I knew with increasing certainty that this is how it was! The author became my mother and I was her youngest son who is exactly one year younger than I am. Not only did images gradually surface, also noises and smells. I recognized all the Japanese and Japanese words quoted. I did not have to look for the translations listed in the back. Reading this book became a lonely but above all emotional trip into my past ...

--Again I hear the swishing of long skirts of a nun's habit. A friendly nun occasionally ladling out mashed fresh fruit to infants and toddlers. I was too old for such special treatment but she gave me some nonetheless, each time she came around. Now I realize she risked severe punishment if someone had betrayed her. Why did she do it? Was it because she simply could not ignore one more starving child?

--Never will I forget the sight of the truck with the small white figures in the back, waving and blessing us. One day the Japanese decided the nuns had to go, they sent them off to unknown destinations in an army truck. I sometimes wonder if any of them survived.

--Again I smell the crushed lice on dirty walls, thinking of it is enough to make me feel sick again. The penetrating, nauseating stench, so strong it would sometimes wake me up in the middle of the night, retching. But not killing most of the lice would have meant bites and infection for which there were no medications.

--Again I lie on the bumpy damp mattress and watch in horror the large rats steal from our meagre food supplies, they fight and kill among each other in their attempts to get the most. These rats were responsible for spreading deadly diseases, they sometimes attacked small, weak children, yet in the end when the food supplies almost ran out, people killed and ate them. I love animals but I have a severe aversion to what are called Norwegian rats, here in Canada. O dear rat free Alberta!

"Happy Birthday to you!"
"Happy Birthday, dear girl,"
"Happy Birthday to you!"

The little girl stands in the centre of the small circle, the children sing, some of the mothers join in. After the final three hip-hip-hurrays the new five year old receives a gift from her mother, a little bassinet with a tiny doll. The big brown eyes, too big in the small bony face, sparkle. With one finger she feels the lace, the little girl doesn't notice the lace is frayed and no longer white; many little girls played with it before it became her birthday present. Suddenly she feels something else tucked in the bassinet, she pulls it out. It is a silver charm bracelet with six tiny animal charms on a short chain. Her mother puts it around her wrist but as the little girl puts her arms around her mother's neck, to give her a big hug the bracelet flies off her wrist into the dust. The bracelet is too wide. A woman picks it up and tells the little girl: 'don't worry, it will fit you soon, you grow like a weed." When the little girl looks up into her mother's face she notices the tears running down the hollow cheeks.

More than anything do I treasure this tiny charm bracelet with the six tiny animals. When my son was five years old

I tried to put it around his wrist, again it didn't fit, his wrist was too big. Maybe it would have fitted a daughter. I also still have another birthday gift, a pencil drawing of a pigsty, the date is February 1945, half a year before the liberation and everything in the camp at its worst. I do indeed have vague memories of a pigsty with pigs, but those pigs were all gone by the time I received this pretty romantic picture. When the Dutch women, and some women with other nationalities, were interned they could only take what they could carry themselves. I carried my doll Joline and my favourite book "Snow White", and I also carried these out of the camp. Despite this restriction it is amazing what was carried into the camps. This resulted in endless bartering and bargaining, food becoming more and more the most precious and valuable possession. My mother must have exchanged food for the bracelet, she may have gone hungry herself in order to give me a birthday gift. You may wonder why all that trouble for a birthday gift? In The Netherlands a birthday is the highlight of the year, more important than Christmas is here, particularly for a child.

How do I, a mother myself, admire these women who tried so hard and succeeded in maintaining a kind of "normal" life for their children under almost impossible circumstances. Occasionally when I feed Tasjka my dog and the smell of her dog food not only makes her mouth water but also mine, I realize her dog food would have been a gourmet dinner in the camp and much more nutritious than what the Japanese fed us.

These women created a "home" on a bed less than 200 cm long and at first 150 cm wide. Later when more women and children were brought into the camps, these beds were only 90 cm wide (for those of you who aren't familiar with the metric system, that is about one yard) for a mother and a child, under a "klamboe", a mosquito net. This was as far as privacy went, if you dare call it privacy when one is surrounded by hundreds of others.

Too young to realize what was really going on, children played, laughed, went to "school" (till the Japanese no longer allowed schools), got themselves dirty and sick; like children all over the world, they kept their mothers busy and in doing so helped their mothers to survive. The ever present fear of what would become of their children if they, the mothers, would die, prevented many a women from giving up, encouraged her to keep fighting till the very end. Many won, many did not . . . My mother must have starved herself repeatedly so that I, her child, could have more. Hundreds of women and children died, we were two of the lucky ones who survived.

10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 . . .

The children are playing hide and seek. The little girl is slow in finding a hiding place. Suddenly she sees a door ajar in a small free standing building. She slips inside ... When her eyes have adjusted to the semi-darkness she sees in the light from a small window high in a wall, a long row of tables. On the tables are forms covered with white sheets. The little girl wonders what they can be till she notices two pale bare feet sticking out from under the sheets. From another table dangles a small arm with a hand not much bigger than her own . . .

The little girl suddenly realizes the still forms under the sheets are people, dead people, waiting to be buried the next day. She knows, she has been with her mother to a funeral outside the camp. She wants to run away, back to the noisy kids outside, but it seems the dead people hold her against her will. She is petrified, staring with horror at the white forms on the trestles. She is no longer aware of the noises outside and somebody calling her name. She only hears the fast beating of her heart in her hollow body, her dainty little nose picks up the smell of death. Her empty stomach

turns, she would like to vomit, but all she can do is stand there and stare . . .

The little girl has no idea how long she has been inside, abruptly the door opens, the light and the heat hit her and so does a firm hand. "You wicked child, what are you doing in here? Don't you know what this is?" No, the little girl didn't know. That night the little girl screams and cries in her sleep; her mother, puzzled by her daughter's distress, tries to comfort her. The little girl cries and cries, she doesn't want her mother to know she is a bad girl because during a game of hide and seek, she hid herself unintentionally in the mortuary.

Over the years a lot has been said and written about the use of the first atom bombs. It meant the end of the war. It also meant the end of countless lives. Many innocent people, including children, lost their lives, many more still suffer from the after effects. Thousands and thousands of people, including children, owe their lives to this horrendous act, many also still suffer from the after effects. For me it means I have to live with the knowledge that if those bombs had not been dropped it is unlikely I would be alive today . . . This knowledge often feels more like a sense of guilt.

Over the last twenty years the number of people who can no longer cope with this guilt or other lasting traumas acquired during the years in the camps, has been on the rise. So is the number of patients seeking psychiatric care in The Netherlands, people still suffering severely from the after-effects of being kept in prisoner-of-war, concentration and internment camps. I am indeed fortunate it happened to me when I was still a very young child. Several times I almost died from starvation and disease, but in the end I came out of it whole, physically and mentally, thanks to my mother's love and care and her never failing trust in a better world to come. Her continuous struggle to keep both of us, but above all *me,* alive, so that we could be joined with my father again after the war, may have contributed to her untimely death in 1960.

I do have my memories, some of them not very pleasant. I realize now I have witnessed harassment, brutalities, physical abuse and torture. Luckily as a child I didn't know and it left no lasting scars. I am not haunted by my memories and I don't suffer from nightmares. Actually only something good came out of this experience; a deeply felt appreciation for life itself, in all its aspects. A lasting gratitude for being alive, for having gone through a happy childhood after the years in the camps with both my parents and my baby sister. A thankfulness for my health, for having a wonderful husband and family, for being able to let our children grow up in a free country.

There are days, though, when I'm inclined to be almost relieved my mother is no longer alive, because what has become of that better world of hers that kept her going through those difficult years? Reading the newspapers and watching TV makes me often wonder why all that suffering was necessary, why did so many people die, why are there wars? It seems to me the world hasn't accomplished much, we may live in a free world but somewhere on this planet wars rage on today, as they did yesterday and most likely will do tomorrow . . .

On August 15, 1988, a monument in The Hague, dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Japanese camps in Indonesia was unveiled by H. M. Queen Beatrix, forty-three years to the day after the capitulation of Japan; better late than never, many survivors must have thought . . .

I haven't had a chance to visit this monument but I have seen the pictures my relatives sent me. Never before have I looked at a monument that moves me as much as this one does, each time I see it tears well up in my eyes. It is an impressive monument in all its simplicity; a group of bronze figures in

front of a high fence symbolize a mute, but ever so determined outcry against injustice.

It is remarkable that from the moment it was unveiled, fresh flowers have been placed daily on the steps leading up to the monument . . . Flowers put down by relatives and friends who had to leave behind their loved ones, buried in Indonesian soil. These people finally have a way to express their loss and sorrow, to pay tribute to those who didn't survive.

I end my story with two quotations from letters my parents wrote shortly after the war. The one my father wrote on September 7, 1945 is the very first one he wrote, he had no idea where my mother and I were and if we were still alive.

"My dear loved ones, thank God it has come to an end and if the three of us do get united again I will be immensely thankful. Many will not be as fortunate as we are. I trust both of you survived and are in good health. . ."

My mother to her parents in The Netherlands;

"I regret I have lost everything including our last trunk. But it no longer matters, all three of us did survive, we can only feel a deep sense of gratitude. . ."