



My life as a child in occupied Holland

Kathryn Boyle
kboyle@theifp.ca

Missing families. Open gunfire. Stray bombs. Hunger. The nightmare of war all too real for ten-year-old Gerda Camman.

The year is 1940 and World War II is on the brink of conception. Gerda hears her parents, Jacob and Agatha, speak of the war, but young Gerda couldn't achieve realizing such a horrible idea. Surely, the war would not happen in the beautiful village of Middelharnis, in Holland, where her parents, her grandmother, and her two younger sisters, Gertrude and Beatrix, lived.

One day, as Gerda's grandmother was hanging laundry outside, German and Dutch planes flew overhead, shooting at each other. The planes fell and from one of the planes, a man engulfed in smoke emerged. And so did the war.

Now 85 years old, Gerda sits in a comfortable chair in her apartment in Georgetown. The window is open, letting in an unusually mild breeze for autumn in Canada. One wouldn't assume Gerda ever resided in occupied Holland, even with her voice coated in a faint blanket of a Dutch accent. With rolls of yarn string stored in every crevice and a seven-year-old black cat named Ichabod lying in the sun, she recalls her story from 70 years ago with a seemingly perfect



Gerda Camman, pictured above in her Georgetown apartment, recalls her story of living in occupied Holland during World War II.

Photo by Kathryn Boyle

memory.

"The first two years weren't too bad. There weren't too many Germans in the village. There was still food in the stores. But then it got worse," Gerda starts.

Rations were introduced. Everyday food items were taken away. Some type of grain became the poor substitute for coffee and bread was born dark because there was no flour. The family bicycles fashioned makeshift garden hose tires because real tires were not sold. Sugar could not be found and

cheese became a delicacy.

For supper, Gerda's mother would make oatmeal porridge with a piece of bread. Their home had a garden where some food was grown, and the family seemed to never run out of potatoes, even after eating them for weeks straight.

After the first two years were over, the horrors of combat entered Middelharnis. The village harbour became the home of the German Navy and would often come under attack by the British army.

"On the way to school, we quite often had to duck into a house when the planes came and shot at the navy," Gerda says. Planes were shot down over the village, and two stray bombs claimed the lives of some locals. It was not uncommon for Nazi soldiers to enter the homes in the village, taking pieces of furniture and cooking supplies right from the shelves. Those belongings would never find their way home.

The two-bedroom family house soon became the home to Gerda's aunt and uncle, who had a young baby, her grandmother, and her family of five. Beds were placed everywhere and anywhere, including the attic.

A curfew was placed on the village that Gerda's father would consistently break. At the time, she nor her mother knew where he went during the night and didn't ask. After the war ended, Gerda would come to know her father was bringing food to Jewish people hidden in the basements of public buildings, where Nazis were not apt to look. The punishment for this act was death. He never got caught.

The schoolhouse became unsafe after gunshots broke out in front of the building, killing a few people. So Gerda's and several other homes became the traveling school for the class of seven.

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Michael Chong

Member of Parliament
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michael.chong@parl.gc.ca

866 - 878 - 5556

