

STORIES FROM HEERJANSDAM (the NETHERLANDS)

DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR (1940-1945)

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By John Kruithof

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today.

Remembrance Day is approaching. It was on November 11th, 1918, that World War I ended, “at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month”. One year later, in 1919, King George V dedicated this day in memory of members of the armed forces who died during World War I. The tradition remains, so that now November 11th is dedicated to remembering all members of the armed forces who died on duty. We recognize the wars and conflicts in addition to World War II in which brave men and women made the ultimate sacrifice. We also pay respect to surviving veterans. If there are any veterans here in the audience, this speech is dedicated to you.

This morning, I will speak of the impact that World War II had on my place of birth, Heerjansdam, the Netherlands. In English, Heerjansdam translates to Sir John’s Dam, in reference to a historical event several centuries ago that saw Sir John build a dam to protect the village. In 1940, I was born there two weeks before the outbreak of fighting, and was five years old when it finished. In 1951, at age 11, my family moved to Canada.

Heerjansdam is a small Dutch village on the southern edge of Rotterdam. At the outbreak of war in 1940, only a few hundred people lived there. It was an agricultural village, its houses more or less strung along a secondary, sleeper dike. The town centre consisted of a few stores, two churches, a modest town hall, a windmill, a baker and candle

stick maker. From that centre, along the dike, were modest homes interspersed with farms. I remember walking and bicycling without having to worry about cars. In fact, when cycling to my dad's garden on the edge of the village, my greatest fear was of a huge pig coming out of a particular farm yard and chasing me like a bat out of hell.

During this talk, I hope to convey to you what life was like in this specific village during WWII. The source of my information is a Dutch booklet entitled "Een ijsbaan hebben we alleen in de winter", published in 1985 by the municipality of Heerjansdam. The reason for its distribution was to keep alive, for the benefit of future generations, memories of the German occupation. The booklet is a 1985 version of 'Lest we forget'. I recently translated it into English. Contained in the booklet are diary entries, wartime stories, and opinions of several residents of Heerjansdam. I will quote these extensively, so the story may be a bit disjointed, but it does follow a chronological order from beginning to end.

I take you back to **May 10, 1940. It is war!** From the diary of a medical doctor in Rotterdam; quote: At about three thirty this morning awoke to the noise of airplanes and anti-aircraft fire, mostly from the direction of the airport. It is soon obvious that we have also been drawn into the war, now underway. We, a completely innocent and neutral land, whose Queen had only a few weeks ago conveyed birthday greetings to Hitler. End of quote.

Also in our village of Heerjansdam, the war is on. Early that morning, German fighter planes roared overhead. Parachutists can be seen floating down in the distance. The occupiers want to conquer our entire country in one day; {{ this is not as farfetched as it sounds; small Holland is right next to mighty Germany }}; so the Germans want as quickly as possible to capture strategic transportation points, which in our area consisted of two bridges and the airport in Rotterdam. War naturally changes everything in our village.

May 11, 1940. Second day of the war. Looking from the dike in a south-easterly direction, great plumes of smoke could be seen on the horizon. It turned out to be farms going up in smoke. German parachutists had landed there, and wherever Dutch army units existed, fighting ensued. Dutch soldiers positioned themselves in, and behind, barns. Germans set them ablaze.

Against this backdrop, the people of Heerjansdam talked among themselves of its significance. Everyone knows everyone, but no one knows exactly what is going on. But then, suddenly, Dutch defenders appeared at the edge of town. Their objective is to retake a neighbouring bridge, occupied by Germans. Carefully, the Dutch soldiers crept along the south side of the dike, then among homes. They had a machine gun, with tripod. Advancing fifty meters at a time, they hid, and set up the machine gun. The next group followed. When they hid, the first group advanced another fifty meters. So it went, forging ahead meter by meter. To questions by the advancing Dutch military “Are there Germans here?” the villagers were able to consistently reply “No Germans”. Unexpectedly, a German military scout drove up by motorcycle. Dutch soldiers, positioned behind their machine gun, aimed, and Rrrrrtt, the German toppled from his motorcycle. Dead! What to do? The captain decided to abandon the attack. The Dutch military turned around, and villagers returned to their daily existence. Or so they thought.

At around milking time, a German military vehicle arrived. Soldiers sprang out and started pounding on doors. Whoever answered was arrested. {{At this point of the story, the booklet becomes very personal to me. It recounts how my father opened the door and immediately felt a bayonet thrust against his stomach}}. A number of Heerjansdam residents were driven to their place of reckoning on the outskirts of town. German gunners stood on both sides. One farmer vehemently protested, in vain, that the timing was inconsiderate, as he had milking to do. It was only after the timely intervention of the mayor, and the church reverend, that the Germans could be persuaded that these

innocent town people could in no way be held responsible for what had happened to the German scout. It had been a military operation. The detainees were released.

In later years, on rare occasions, my father would speak of this event. He would mention the arrival of the mayor, whose ceremonial hat sat askew on the top of his head, obviously a sign of the great haste it had been put on, and the reverend of the church, who wore a distinctive hat. In my mind it became fixed as the story involving funny hats. When I got hold of this booklet last year, this aspect of my father's story checks out. It mentions the mayor's arrival, and the reverend, who is quote wearing his characteristic long black coat and Garibaldi hat, nervously pacing about unquote. Perhaps Dad focused on this picture, rather than the guns staring him in the face.

Monday, May 13, 1940. Queen Wilhelmina, against her will, left for England. The day before, Princess Juliana, Prince Bernhard and the two princesses had left.

May 15, 1940. Five days into the war. The Germans had bombed Rotterdam and threatened leveling other cities. Our Queen and her government had fled to England, to govern our land from there to the extent possible. Dutch General Winkelman was ordered to defend our country. But against German might, the Dutch army was no match. In face of German threats of bombing more cities, Winkelman decided, in order to save lives, to surrender. Terms of capitulation were drawn up. At a Christian lower school, in a village within an easy bicycle ride from Heerjansdam, the Netherlands surrendered. German occupation had begun.

By the fourteenth day of the war, Heerjansdam had seen enormous and impressive German shock troops and tank units going by. The village had been choked with anti-aircraft guns. Residents must sleep in ground-level rooms, not upstairs. During the evening, curtains must be drawn. It was forbidden to look outside at night. Lights must be kept off. During darkness, German troop movements occurred. Units passed

through, stayed, or were replaced. Day and night, massive infantry forces filled the streets.

June 2nd, 1940. A resident noted in her diary: Quote: This morning at seven thirty the Germans quartered here left our village, singing as they went. It is Sunday and in church we stood to remember the dead and listen to a message from the churches. End of quote.

June 27, 1940. Dutch General Winkelman, who was denied access to the press, surreptitiously circulated a written statement outlining the perfidies of the occupiers. As a postscript, he expressed the hope that readers would copy his statement and distribute it among the population. Quote: We are counting on you. COURAGE!!! LONG LIVE THE QUEEN!! Unquote. For a number of Heerjansdam residents, this was reason to organize themselves in a group to indeed spread the news. They also spoke among themselves on how to mislead Germans and secretly oppose them to the extent possible. It's called resistance.

We now jump ahead four months. **October 14, 1940.** As of today, in order to conserve fuel, school time on Saturdays from 9 to 11 in the morning for Christian education is discontinued. The time will be shifted to Wednesday afternoons.

October 25, 1940. Various newspapers and periodicals are outlawed by the occupiers. During the sugar beet campaign, the sugar beet factory across the river from Heerjansdam was bombed. There were 23 deaths.

July 31, 1941. Our faithful mayor is replaced with someone the Germans can more easily deal with.

October 23, 1941. During this evening's meeting of the Christian school board, it was disclosed an allocation of 30 bags of coal would be received. Fortunately, 90 sacks were still in the coal bin. Thus there will be enough fuel until the end of January 1942.

Ration cards are in effect for just about everything. Initially, the cards were distributed by municipal employees. With some creative

tampering, allowance was made for additional cards for those in hiding, and Jews, who were denied ration cards by the Germans. Unfortunately, that tampering came to an end when distribution was taken over by outsiders. A quote not so good Hollander unquote was on this new team, leading to a curtailment of tampering. A little later on in this story I will recount the drastic measure that had to be undertaken in order to secure illegal ration cards.

April 13, 1942. Scarcity and unavailability were felt more and more. Oranges on ration cards, and only obtainable for children. Tobacco, cigars, all tobacco products, only obtainable on the cards. As is candy. Writing paper, all paper products are nearly impossible to buy.

Sunday, May 3, 1942. All Jews were forced to wear the yellow Jewish Star, also known as the Star of David, sewn on their clothes. On page 12 of the booklet, there is a picture of family Simon den Hartog, born in Heerjansdam, who for years had a butcher shop on Main Street. It pictured him, his wife, and four children, two of them young adults. Most of this family did not survive the war.

During the winter, the German occupiers pressured residents into contributing to a program called “Winter Relief”. Municipal staff was pressed into service collecting these monetary contributions. Heerjansdam residents were surreptitiously encouraged not to contribute anything. Yet the effort had to be made. A pleasant, trustworthy and well-known resident was found, who was prepared to take the tin from house to house. Everywhere the whisper had spread: Don’t put money in the tin, if anything, slip it directly to the collector. Not once did the collector urge anyone to donate to the official effort, knowing full well the resistance movement was against this project. After making his rounds, the content of the tin was counted at the town hall. The then-serving mayor did that himself, never counting more than a very few guilders. The collector himself received more than was dropped in the tin.

The German military ran into severe shortages of basic materials, particularly copper, of which bullets were made. The Dutch population was asked for copper. An order came down from the commissariat of the province for mayors to institute a copper collection program in their communities. Citizens who possessed copper must hand it over to city hall on a specified date. Most citizens did not comply. Again, it was a case of residents being clandestinely instructed by municipal staff to ignore the order. An insignificant little vase, or something from the windowsill, was sometimes offered. But some people did bring valuable items. An antique copper milk can, of a size often used in entrances as umbrella stands, was brought in. This was a real shame. But then we thought of something. When we knew how much copper had been collected, let's say 25 kg., we put 25 kg. of sand in the copper milk can, and kept back a corresponding amount of copper. Needless to say, we were curious as to how this was going to work out, because the milk can had become unnaturally heavy. We hoped for the best. A villager had to transport the copper to a nearby city. You can imagine our sigh of relief when he came back and reported everything worked out great. He had to position his horse and cart on a riverside quay, unload item after item on a slide, which deposited it directly on a ship. It was not even weighed. It was signed for, and he got out of there as quickly as possible. At home, we had an inner sense of satisfaction, knowing the Germans had received a load of copper partially consisting of sand.

January 6, 1943. At a quarter past ten this morning, church bells started ringing. Heerjansdam knows the significance of this. People came out for the occasion. This is the last time we will hear this sound. Everywhere, church bells are being removed, and today is Heerjansdam's turn. On orders of the German occupiers, a local contractor is removing two bells, one of 250 kg., the other 65 kg. The bells will likely be melted down to make bullets. Who knows who will get killed with a piece of Heerjansdam's bells.

Spring, 1943. The underground resistance was not yet centrally financed. Money that became available was from voluntary

contributions. Each village introduced an “assessment” and someone from the village took responsibility for collecting it. That individual himself decided from whom to collect and how much to request. Nobody hesitated handing over the requested amount. Nobody asked for a receipt, naturally not. Imagine what could be found should homes be searched. Nobody asked what the money was for.

April 25, 1943. The daughter of Jewish family den Hartog, who had fled Heerjansdam to hide in Amsterdam, wrote a letter: “I feel terribly sad and seek solace wherever I can and I know how you support me, but I will never overcome this grief, this is the worst that could happen to me. Herewith enclosed is the letter my dear mother wrote last. From it you can read how she had a premonition she would be sent on. Isn’t that terrible and are resigned that we will never see her again. It is joyful to read how brave she is, but that does not take away that I lost her and in this manner. Horrible it is, there is no other word for it”.

April 30, 1943. A work stoppage took place throughout the country. No water comes out of taps. People anxiously ask what this strike will develop into. At a cost to human life, the Germans crushed the strike.

Thursday, May 13, 1943. Newspapers carried notices that all radios and parts thereof must be handed over to authorities. House searches will be conducted and anyone ignoring the order can expect severe punishment. Meat rations are reduced to 50 gr. per person per week.

June 23, 1943. Last Sunday morning, a loudspeaker drove through the streets of Amsterdam. No Jew was any longer allowed on the street. They had to prepare themselves. They were trapped. That Sunday, 1,100 Jews were apprehended. The coming Tuesday, 4,000 Jews will be put on the train to Germany, which happens each week.

June 30, 1943. A piece of oral history recorded in the booklet. We, in Heerjansdam, received tea bags from the sky. On a particular morning, tidings spread through the village: Tea bags had been dropped. About 50 were found, no more. Many bags were lost, but those who had them

showed them off as precious gems, and later in the war traded them for food.

Sunday, November 1, 1943. The mayor of our village, considered a German sympathizer, angrily left the Reformed Church this morning. A visiting preacher prayed for the oppressed, the prisoners, and for our Queen, still in England. No sooner had the reverend said “amen” that the mayor took to his feet and abruptly, deliberately, exited the church.

There is practically nothing left to buy in stores. No glassware, or pottery, especially no luxury items. If you want to buy a gift for someone, the choice is not difficult: Only books are available. Everything is expensive and what you do buy is junk. One has to be content with margarine and cheese: 100 grams in fourteen days.

December, 1943. In order to escape from Heerjansdam, a villager fled to a more isolated town some 150 km. away. He wrote back: “my future boss took me directly to the farmstead. The reception by these people was tremendous. They are young, around 30 years old, with a child of 2 years. I have a room with a nice bed. I will survive well here, of that I have no doubt. They are such wonderful people. One thing is not so good; when they speak to each other, I don’t understand a word they are saying. When they speak directly to me, it is somewhat better. That will improve quickly, says the “boss”. I gave my ration cards to the mistress, who promptly gave them back. Consider them your Sint Nicolaas present, she said.”

January, 1944. I mentioned earlier how difficult it was to obtain illegal ration cards. A more direct approach had to be devised. An underground resistance cell, consisting of five members, staged an armed robbery of the Heerjansdam town hall, on January 25, 1944 at 4:00 p.m. Cell members had been informed by insiders that a new supply of ration cards had just been received from the Germans. So the resistance cell conducted a robbery. The population register was removed from its container, torn apart, and fed into stoves. The haul consisted of a quantity of identity papers, stamps, seals and contents of

the money-box. On completion, shouting “Long live the Queen, long live the Fatherland” the cell members left Heerjansdam. This kind of operation was also conducted in other towns. It was dangerous work, and the German occupiers were not soft in punishing those they were able to get their hands on. When eventually caught, two members of the cell were executed on July 16, 1944, another died on New Year’s Day 1945, in the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen.

At the time, the German Secret Police must have been suspicious about municipal staff complicity, so they questioned everyone. This included the municipal cashier, a remarkable woman named Mag Sloof, who had in fact tipped off the resistance cell about the stock of ration cards being stored in the vault. So insistent had Mag been on being there for the actual robbery that she had deliberately stayed on at the town hall, even though it was supposed to be closed at 4:00 p.m., the time the resistance team struck. They were a bit surprised to find her there, so they subjected her to the treatment. At gunpoint, she was marched into a cell. Eventually, Mag is questioned. She later recounts how she had not forgotten that if you lower your leg in a certain manner, it trembles so much that it fools even the German Secret Police.

Last year, I mentioned the name Mag Sloof to my older sister. She immediately said: Oh, yes, Dad used to think the world of her; nothing but words of praise for her.

Now, I do too! I did some research on the Internet and learned Mag died in the year 2002 at the age of 96.

March 3, 1944. Heerjansdam experiences a very anxious day. On awakening that morning, it was discovered all access to and from the village had been cut off by over 100 Germans. Nobody could get in or out of town. Anyone on the street was picked up and placed under guard at the school. A house to house search was conducted for the presence of radios, and people in hiding. Unfortunately, six persons were found and taken away. A radio was found at the home of a school teacher. He was also taken away.

March 22, 1944. The unsettling rumour turns out to be true: The polders are to be inundated. All residents are urged to assist in forming an embankment behind homes in the hope of keeping them water free. The inundation was by order of the occupiers, to prevent liberators from landing, or dropping parachutists. Eventually, 85% of the Heerjansdam area is under water.

Food shortage is becoming worse; more and more people are suffering from hunger.

April 18, 1944. From a height of 36,000 feet, the British Royal Air Force (R.A.F) took pictures over Heerjansdam, which will possibly serve later as direction finders for British warplanes to area drop sites.

May 12, 1944. An awful lot of noise in the night sky over Heerjansdam. Everything rattles.

May 31, 1944. A train was strafed by allied aircraft. Four people are killed, an additional five severely wounded. The train track is clearly visible from our home, and I witnessed the event.

September 17, 1944. This morning, a Rhine barge arrived in the harbour of Heerjansdam. Some 200 German soldiers disembarked. At 2:00 p.m. Allied fighter planes flew overhead with deafening noise. They dropped their bombs, but on the wrong harbour. No bombs fell in our village.

October 24, 1944. This morning, two houses, with contents, were burned down by the Germans. A radio had been found.

October 31, 1944. A terrible day. Two great canons set up by the Germans to fire on advancing liberators started up. Everything reverberates and shakes. At the first shot all windows in the vicinity are shattered and roof tiles slide down. The town centre is one great chaos.

March 4, 1945. The situation becomes more serious. No electricity, no gas, no fuel to buy. The taps are dry. No water. A committee has

arranged for “school soup”, that is to say on Wednesday noon, school children could collect a portion of soup, first come first served.

Increasingly, our land is bombed. V-1s and V-2s were launched by Germans toward England. For the slightest of reasons, Dutch detainees were executed. This, in order to create fear in our hearts, and for the occupiers to show who is boss, that our fate rests in their hands. Many people in our land starve of hunger. Household goods, clothing, carpets, gold and silver jewelry, everything, that means everything, one tries to barter for food. Food is the only thing one talks about.

April 12, 1945. The church reverend sees the hour of liberation approaching. Quote: This meeting comes at a time which rightly can be termed historic. Wartime peril has reached its peak: Hunger and starvation are horribly affecting our people. But all signs point to the battle coming to an end and that the day of liberation, also for the Netherlands, is not far off. Unquote.

Liberation! In early May, 1945, the Germans are defeated. On Saturday, May 5, at a hotel in the centre of Holland, terms of capitulation are read out to the German commander, to be officially signed the next day. The hour of liberation has come. Queen Wilhelmina spoke on the radio: quote our language has no words for what is in our hearts at this time of liberation of the entire Netherlands. Finally, we are again masters in our own land. Unquote. Men returned home, after hiding out for short, or long, periods of time. Also those who had been deported to Germany for slave labour, and survived, returned. Joy in reunited families, but also grief in those whose fathers or sons never returned.

The booklet, written in 1985, ends this way: Quote forty years after liberation, we stand silent for a moment. Those who read this will hopefully never go through an experience like this again. Unquote.

To which I say, Amen.

Thank you for your attention.