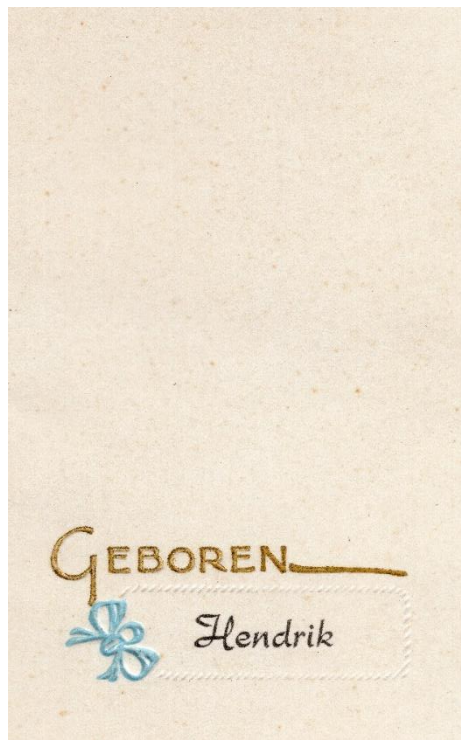


My Story  
By Henry Slofstra  
Part 1, the Netherlands



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De Heere verblijdde ons met  
de geboorte van een Zoontje  
die wij

Hendrik

noemden

Grootegast, 22 Mei 1953

L. Slofstra

D. Slofstra—Lollinga

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LIONS!

Lions, again! Half-awake in the early morning, poking my head out from several layers of woollen blanket, scanning as my face tingled from the brisk Spring air, I froze and screamed for Papa. Moment before, I had been drowsing, dreamy and content, distracted by the wedges of golden light beaming through the windows, playing on the walls of our ancient and drafty house. And then, suddenly, lions, scraping and roaring at the door, again. I imagine I was too young to visualize exactly what lions do, but still, the sounds touched a primal chord of fear within me, and so, I could only scream for help. Help always came, from my father, rather quickly, in a way that now arouses my suspicion. The kings of beasts were quickly dispatched by my paternal rescuer, forced back to their captive, frozen state, down the hall from my bedroom. All was safe.

Later in the day, with my equilibrium restored, I would walk past the storage room above my parents' grocery store, and peer in to see the two lions locked in the arms of an ancient wooden chair, in a place not normally inhabited by mammals of prey: Ten Boer, in the province Groningen, in the northern Netherlands. I knew even then, as a very little Dutch boy, that lions did not inhabit our area, but these were not the kind found on the African savannah, in retrospect, they clearly were mystical beasts.

The chair, I learned years later, was a family heirloom of my grandmother, technically my step-grandmother, who had married my widower grandfather living in Canada, and had left some items with us in storage in Ten Boer. But I did not know anything of that then, or of my extended family, nor of the symbolism of 'lions' in the history of my birth country which found them enshrouded in Dutch Coats of Arms, seals, postage stamps and shields. And chairs.

My understanding of the events of my early years has come through a lifetime of revelation and reflection, and so, I am occasionally required to jump ahead in my story, as I did just then. At the time, I knew nothing of the provenance of the chair, only that it contained lion spirits, and so I was afraid to do more than glimpse through a crack in the open door, and move quickly on. The lions, carved directly into the chair's arms, were impressively ferocious, their jaws thrusting improbably forward. And then one day, the chair was taken away, and with its physical disappearance, the lions no longer

terrorized me, the experience and feelings to be recollected many years and many miles later, but I'll get to that.

Our family left Groningen, a province in northern Holland, in 1959, before my sixth birthday. When we left, I took with me a lasting sense of the place that was raw and deep, a sense that has stayed with, and within me, for my whole life. Groningen remains in my memory as a magical place, a very real magical place, not simply a fantasy. The history and geography of a given place, as can be learned from books, or from the stories of family experience, enlighten us, but do not capture the state of wonder which attends our first experiences as children. Because the time and the place of my childhood came to an abrupt and early end, Groningen has retained the strong aura that surrounds childhood experience, a sensual aura that is deep seated in my core. I have returned for visits as an adult, but coming to know Groningen as an adult, a place with offices, farms and factories, and a folk with problems and obligations and jobs, does not approach its special place for me as a seat of childhood wonder. That wonder was established in the early years of my life, and that wonder has been attached to my memory of the place, ever since.

I first returned to the Netherlands, married, with my wife and our first baby child, 25 years after our family had left. The descent into Schiphol airport over the Dutch landscape was exhilarating: truly I felt then that this was still a Dutch fairytale land, and then, in a jet lagged dreamy drive back to northern Holland, various sense triggers from my childhood were overwhelming. Primarily, it was the smell of the place, deep and green and wet and earthy, unforgettable, deeply rooted in my brain stem, beyond memory, not subject to forgetting, or to remembering, and only properly recognizable as I experienced that land once again.

I have learned that there is a unique Dutch sky, caught by artists such as Vermeer or even the French painter, Monet. I recognized the unique shades of grey and blue in those skies on my first return trip. Shades not seen elsewhere triggered pleasant memories of former days as a young child in the northern country, days when I would pass the hours on my back in the deep green grass with my friends, our fancies taken by a parade of cloud shapes against that uniquely grey-blue sky.

Kites were common when I was a child, and I often saw older children and adults fly them in meadows and in the town square. A gentle man once explained the mechanics to me. I was keenly interested in the dual strings and

the manoeuvrability and the tail, but the simple poetry of skies, wind and the dance of the kites were the prime attraction. I realized on the return trip that as a child, there had been much to interest me in that Dutch sky; I had not looked at the sky all that much in more recent years.

A borg, or mansion, with an extensive farm operation, sat on the edge of town, not far from my parent's place. A haywagon might pass by as we played in the pasture, and the farm hand would wave to us and toss us way up to the very top, and we would lie back, sink in and surrender to the aroma of the life force resplendent in fresh mown hay. One day, as the wagon drew close to the barn, a wheel slipped off the road, and wagon, hay, children and all, tumbled into the ditch. There were shouts, and worry lined the faces as every adult within range came running. Hurriedly, they peeled back the hay to get to us, but we were fine. I was certainly fine, and the grownup sense of dread was soon dispelled by our giggles and then, our laughter, surrounded by the relieved and amused smiles of those who dug us out.

As a very young boy might do, I greatly admired the older neighbour boy who came around to our house, and I would sometimes see him in the field, setting spring traps to catch moles in their tunnels. One day, out of nothing more than idle curiosity, I dug up and tore out some of his traps. Somehow, I was found out for my actions, and when I was accused by the older boy of having done this, I could only deny the deed. When I saw how angry he was, I was not so frightened of any punishment that might be forthcoming. than I was of losing his friendship, and, indeed, he no longer came to visit. The unexpectedness and shock of that interaction, the feeling of which I still possess, makes me believe that this was my first lesson in understanding that seemingly inconsequential, impulsive acts can have unforeseen and unfortunate consequences for others, and then, for ourselves. Tearing up the traps was an idle deed, and I was shocked at the result. Understanding consequences has been a life-long revelation for me, and I am still learning, even now.

At some point my parents gave me a very decent scooter: not one of the common ones with small, hard wheels but very rideable, inflatable tires. I had free roam of the town of Ten Boer, peddling my scooter wherever I pleased. A favourite destination was the statue of Hendrik Wester, who I still know nothing about. Nor am I even curious, as a statue indicates more the influence of its subject than character, accomplishment or an interesting life. The

significance of this statue was its inclusion of a pulpit, on which I liked to climb. I would climb up on the pulpit, gaze around and carefully scramble back down. At some point, I began to think about jumping to the ground below, and once I had dared to do it, that became the standard exit procedure. On these trips, I also liked to look in at shop windows showing toys or kitchen wares and fine china or clothing. In the age that preceded media advertising, much more attention was paid to window displays to attract customers and were evidence of a much wider world than just our town. I had an adventurous young friend who dared to venture inside one of the goods' stores, but this resulted in a quick ejection with a stern lecture. Already the world was dividing into good and bad adults, and such stores were never run by good adults, to my reckoning.

During my sojourns around the village, I always kept an eye out for grey clouds, ready to hurry home when thunder storms began to roll in. One day I was caught in a terrific storm and sped home with a howling wind at my back with my foot barely touching the ground as I peddled. I was exhilarated by the energy of the wind and rain as I came speeding into the yard behind our store. Usually, I managed to beat storms home, although in this case I was soaked from head to foot. Sure, my mother was concerned, but I began to form an impression that my mother, and adults in general, worried just a little too much.

Our little town of Ten Boer was possessed of two opposing atmospheres, by turns, dark, wet and forbidding or light and cheerful. Shadow or light, nothing in between. Ten Boer is situated on flat land in the northern part of the Netherlands, quite open to the ravages of storms coming in from the North Sea. Days of cold rain would drench the landscape, with the angry sea seeming to want to reclaim what once was hers. For centuries, the waters did inundate the land periodically. Many towns in that area were built on terps, extensive high mounds that rose above the surrounding countryside, mounds where dwellings would be safe whenever sea waters surged over or through the fragile dike works protecting the farm land.



*Figure 1 - Aerial photo of Ten Boer, 1955*

The rainstorms of my childhood were ferocious with intense lightning flashes and instantaneous ear splitting cracks of thunder. There was no time to count elephants from flash to crack as we did years later in Canada. Our mother would draw the heavy curtains, across the light lace ones that always graced our windows, and the family would sit in the center of the kitchen around the table, until the worst had passed.

The streets of Ten Boer, deserted during rain storms, never saw much auto traffic in those early post war years. The doctor had a car, seemingly the only one in town. Trucks sped by on the main highway just to the east of town. Some of these carried loads of sugar beets, and the older boys sometimes found beets that had whizzed off the top of a loaded truck onto the road side. These boys took pleasure in feeding these to horses, one of which was the horse that drew the milk wagon through the town. In my mind's eye I can still see that old horse's large teeth and gums slathering and enjoying this



treat. Frequently a fish truck came by, and we'd beg our mother for a coin to buy a maatje. We enjoyed this marinated, raw fish treat as much as the milk wagon's horse enjoyed his, I am certain.

SINTERKLAAS AND CHRISTMAS AND OUR STORE

My mother and father's livelihood depended on the store they ran, and in which we also lived, on the northern edge of Ten Boer. In December, the grocery store's windows were filled with brightly coloured foil Sinterklaas's, with his carriage and slaves in tow. The nearby bakery displayed kerstkrans, an almond filled ring of pastry, as well as ginger bread, and speculaas cookies. Best of all was the local china shop with its spectacular figures and ornaments in its display windows. On December evenings the streets were aglow with the frosty light from shop windows and street lamps.

Our home always had an evergreen tree decorated with candles, which were lit every evening. As romantic as that seems, my abiding memory of the tree is one of frequent small fires when a candle would tip. Somehow these were always extinguished before much damage was done.



*Figure 2 - Groningen children with St. Martinus lanterns, 1950s*

In the late Fall, our province celebrated a feast known as Saint Martinus. The children went from door to door carrying colourful cylindrical lanterns made of paper folded into an accordion shape. These lanterns were dangled on the far end of a wooden stick. Inside was a lit candle. I was considered too young to have one, but the thought that I would be denied such a pleasure was too much to bear, especially when I saw the procession of neighbours and children and their lanterns aglow in an array of colour accentuated by the surrounding black Fall night. So, I could only sob. Let no one think that a child's histrionics are calculated and manipulative; my tears were generally spontaneous and deeply felt. On this occasion, my parents understood, and relented. But the task was not an easy one for small arms and hands. You had to hold the paper lantern perfectly steady, or the flame would contact the paper sides. Of course, I couldn't hold it straight enough and this led to the inevitable, a fiery end for my lantern.

This event was one more in a string of childhood failures, and I began to carry a lingering sense of disappointment in myself. I was the boy who fell in the ditch, soaked from head to toe, the one who burned his bum when sitting on the pis pot near the coal stove, and the one caught with his hands in the cookie tin, while my brother, who took the first one, was outside, scot-free, relishing his cookie, and also, my failure, or so I thought. Now that was an injury far beyond any punishment I ever took from my parents. The injustice!

I was never so concerned about my parents being disappointed in me, as much as the accumulated sense of failure from my various inabilities. Stealing cookies wasn't a moral issue, but another point of failure. I just couldn't steal one without getting caught. Parental admonishment in this case was a

secondary issue; the real problem was my brother always getting the cookie while I was punished.

My brother Piet was a year younger than I was, and a constant thorn in my side, really right up to grade school in Canada. (That certainly changed with age and maturity.) He did not receive preferential treatment from my parents, that was not the issue; rather, it seemed that God was constantly smiling on him, and not on me. And he acted like he knew this to be true.

Our store sold jars of jam, advertised through a character named Flipje, whose body was made out of round red berries. Adventure stories based on Flipje and his various animal friends were also available, and made an indelible impression on my childhood imagination.



*Figure 3 - The Adventures of Flipje*

Also on the shelves were jars of chocolate syrup to be spread on sandwiches, less common than the ubiquitous chocolate hagel slag, but very chocolatey and tasty all the same. The syrup jars included a comic strip in the form of a small booklet. These my brother and I received in turn with each new jar purchase. In one case, my brother was given one of these booklets by mistake, because it was actually my turn. Piet and my parents both insisted that it was his turn, and nothing could dissuade them from that point of view. I was able to convince my parents to at least let me look at the booklet, before it disappeared forever into Piet's clutches. In a fit of pique, I promptly tore the booklet into a dozen pieces and tossed them into the air. This time swift and

severe retribution from my parents followed, but oh, the odiousness of my brother, to lie like that when the booklet was clearly mine.

I have already mentioned the porcelain pis pot, an indelible part of my childhood life. We had no indoor plumbing. A two seater outhouse was positioned on the far side of the small yard at the rear of the house. I did on occasion use this facility in the summertime, but it was an experience that I dreaded. The toilet seat hole was ominously large, with proportions generous even by adult standards, and I had to spread eagle out my arms and legs across this very smelly opening to keep from falling in.

Thus, the porcelain pot was the appliance greatly preferred for bodily excretions, and in winter time, best used in proximity to the coal stove, which heated, and I'm being generous in using that word, the living area behind our store. Experience is a cruel teacher. Sitting further than tipping distance from a coal stove, especially with a bare bum, was an especially painful one to learn the hard way.

While Sinterklaas and Christmas both happened near the Winter Solstice, the two are very disparate holidays and nothing alike. Sinterklaas evolved into the North American "Santa Claus" from Dutch immigrants who had settled in the upper Hudson Valley in New York. But unlike 'Santa Claus', Sinterklaas was observed in early December, December 6<sup>th</sup>. Christmas was strictly a contemplative holiday focused on religious worship, while Sinterklaas featured a feast, merriment and gift giving, all of the elements that North Americans routinely associate with Christmas Day. Many Dutch immigrants to Canada, though not all, felt that a focus on gifts and Santa Claus polluted the sanctity and glory of the birth of Jesus. I would imagine that the earlier Sinterklaas celebration suited the Protestant instinct in getting potentially sinful stuff out of the way ahead of time. The unfortunate result, as far as my own religious upbringing, was that Sinterklaas remains an indelible part of my early childhood memories; Jesus, not so much.

My father began to take us to church on Sundays, and I remember little of the experience, although family photos of my father, in his Sunday suit, hand in hand with an earnestly scrubbed and groomed boy on each side, attest that the event did occur. All I remember of the experience is being punished for misbehaving, but in what the misbehaviour constituted I have no recollection.



*Figure 4 - On the way to church, L to R, me, Father, Piet*

My abiding sense of God's favour being withheld only increased when I began to attend kleuterskool, the Dutch kindergarten. A single memory stands out from the entire kleuterskool experience. The entire student population was gathered to perform exercises in the gymnasium, and one of these consisted in holding a block between our lifted feet from a sitting position on the floor. The

teacher became increasingly annoyed at being interrupted by the intermittent clunk of blocks dropped onto the floor as little feet fatigued and failed, and all the children were instructed to lower their blocks. All the children but me. Having somehow missed the instruction, I gleefully and proudly continued to hold up my 'block' while all around me had failed or given up. And then came the inevitable clunk. Now why is 'juffrouw', the teacher, staring at me with a rueful and angry gaze? Is that my name being called to come to the front of the class? Is she seriously admonishing me, before the entire gymnasium of children, and then viciously twisting my left ear? Me, Hendrik, who held up his block, so long and so well. Do not fear, gentle reader, that my self-esteem was endangered by this incident. All I ever learned from most of the punishments endured in my early childhood was a growing sense of the unfairness of authorities, and an increasing wariness of such figures. Much later, long past when it mattered, did I even entertain the idea that I might be the one at fault.

As December approached, we heard that Sinterklaas was going to attend kleuterskool and visit the children. My previous experience with the saint, as with the dominee at church, and juffrouw at the kleuterskool, left me in trepidation of the coming event. The year before, my parents had taken me to see the arrival of Sinterklaas in all his resplendent glory: flowing white beard, layered red bishop's hat, and lavish, brocaded robes, riding a carriage drawn by a white horse, with his slaves in tow. I still remember the approach of this entourage on the crowd-lined street, and it more filled me with dread than anything else. Then quite suddenly a hail of pepernoten was fired from the carriage like bullets from a gun. Pepernoten are small morsels of a very hard, dry form of gingerbread. In spite of how that sounds, they actually do taste quite nice. But on that day, I could only hide behind a tree to avoid the onslaught, and cry in fear at the prospect of being hurt by pepernoten bullets.



*Figure 5 - Sinterklaas is coming to town ...*

And that was not my only source of dread at the prospect of meeting Sinterklaas. I had more general worries than just the Sinterklaas Day Massacre, as I now refer to it. My parents frequently reminded me that Sinterklaas's Black slave, Zwarte Piet, carried off bad children in his sack, and left them only a lump of black coal as a present. As the special day at kleuterskool approached, I was certain that Zwarte Piet would carry me off for all my various misdeeds through the year. My father did not help matters with his teasing each year on the eve of St. Nicholas Day, "will Zwarte Piet carry you off tonight, Henkie?" With all that hanging over my head, I was very diligent in stuffing one of my wooden shoes with straw to feed Sinterklaas's horse. Perhaps that would ward off the inevitable, as it had done the year before. And it worked! By the very fact of waking up on St. Nicholas Day in my bed, and not stuffed into a dark sack, I knew I had made it through Sinterklaas eve for another year.

And so, on a day appointed for Sinterklaas to appear at our kleuterskool, I feigned illness to avoid the encounter. To say 'feigned' is not entirely accurate, as I genuinely felt ill from fear, and was allowed to keep to my bedroom. As the day progressed, and with the evident success of my ruse, I came around a bit. Disaster had been averted. I stayed in my room, working on my numerals just for fun, when Dad came into the room. "There's someone here to see you."

Oh, no! Sinterklaas had made a special trip to our house after school so that one special boy wouldn't miss out due to illness. Nothing to be done to prevent it now, and I shuffled into the living room, mortified. There sat Sinterklaas with face almost entirely hidden behind a large beard, white as white can be, in his full bishop's regalia, wearing a tall pointed mire, and a staff topped with a golden curl.

But wait.

Sitting so close, and relaxing in a chair in our front room, Sinterklaas didn't look nearly so imposing. With a kind expression on his wrinkled face, and a warm smile, he asked to see the piece of paper I had been working on, still in my hand. Looking at the grid of numerals I had traced out, he praised me for my work, that I could write numerals so well, already at my age, and so on.



*Figure 6 - Sinterklaas with a child, circa 1950s*

This event turned a corner for me. For one thing, praise, as a general technique, was not to be found in the guidebook for raising Dutch children, not from parents, neighbours or 'juffrouw', the kindergarten teacher. Sinterklaas's kind words and praise for my work, coming from a person so eminent in reputation and appearance, and this followed by a number of treats from his bag, including chocolate figures dressed in coloured foil, a chocolate letter, and the ubiquitous pepernoten, turned a corner for me. I think also that this was a starting point for me in tempering my judgements of people and situations unfamiliar to me.



MY FAMILY

While I have mentioned my family during that time in the town of Ten Boer, including my father, my mother, my brother and rival, Piet, there was also a baby, Martin who was born five years after me, in 1958. I also had a large extended family on my father's side that was not a part of my Dutch childhood experience as they had emigrated the year before I was born.

My paternal grandfather, Opa, a widower, had left for Canada on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, 1952 with three uncles, the second oldest after my father, Meerten, then just 21, and Willem and Henk; and two aunts, Tjaakje and Trientje, who, at age 11, was the youngest in Opa's family. One uncle, Piet, then 19, and one aunt, Pieterdina, 16, stayed behind in Groningen, and on a return visit decades later I learned the full story of the reason they stayed behind. The night before Opa was to leave for the port of Rotterdam, Piet and Pieterdina were nowhere to be found. My grandfather spent the entire night looking for them, without success, and the following morning the family had to leave for the port of Rotterdam. Passage had been booked on the ocean liner, *Zuiderkruis*. Piet and Pieterdina had not wanted to leave the country, and so their maternal grandparents helped hide them away on the eve of departure.

I have only a faint recollection of my Uncle Piet from those early years in Groningen. Uncle Piet was known for his wavy, curly locks and quiet demeanour. Sadly, he died in 1967, when a car ran into his bicycle as he rode on a country road one rainy evening.

(In the 1960s, cycling accidents were all too frequent as an increasing number of automobiles competed for road space with far more numerous bicycles. The country's growing prosperity brought a large increase in automobile ownership. The downside was a very high cycling fatality rate, which provoked demonstrations by activists and the public. The result was the beginning of the segregated cycling path network for which the Netherlands is known today.)



*Figure 7 - Uncle Piet, known for his wavy hair.*

Tante Pieterdina did visit our family on occasion in Ten Boer, and was a force. One day she related to our mother an animated account of someone she knew that had thrown eggs indoors at someone else. The incident was well outside the realm of what I thought adults could ever do. Her liveliness and humour did not fit the dour and oppressive nature with which most adults seemed to be possessed. Should an adult be that gleeful about such a prank? How refreshing that at least one person was. Decades later, we met Pieterdina again at Opa's house in Alberta, Canada, and later again, at her home and small village store in the Netherlands. In those visits she lived up to the impression she had made all those years before.



*Figure 8 - Me, Tante Pieterdina, 1980 in Alberta*

Boiled eggs were a staple of our meals in those days, and at breakfast these sat in wooden egg cups at the side of our plates. We would carefully spoon out the contents from one end of the egg, trying hard to keep the shell intact. If we succeeded, and Dad happened to be away from the table, (and how odd that he often was when we did this), we would replace our father's uneaten egg with the carefully prepared hollow shell. When he appeared at the table, we kept an eye on him as he enjoyed his buttermilk porridge, so that we wouldn't miss the anticipated moment. Not that this was needed. For he would announce, "oh, how nice, an egg this morning". Up would come the egg spoon to tap the top of the egg, which would completely cave in, to our great mirth, and his evident consternation. "Well, good thing I still have one

more", our Mother would say, and another egg would magically reappear from somewhere.

Daytime meals were always followed by a story from the massive children's Bible, which were written in a fashion to provoke a child's interest. And oh, the colour plates. All the inhabitants of Earth except Noah's family, drowned in the Flood, Abraham about to slay his son, Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt, Jacob stealing the birthright of his brother, Moses killing the Egyptian, the various plagues visited on the Egyptians, like the locusts and the frogs, the parting of the Red Sea and the drowning of all of Pharoah's host, Saul throwing a spear at David, and David cutting a piece of coat from a sleeping Saul, and Absalom, David's son, hanging by his hair from a tree. How we relished these stories, and so unlike the supper Bible reading from the actual Bible, or the interminable sermons we had to suffer through in church when whatever it was that possessed our Father induced him to take us.

MY PARENTS



*Figure 9 - Mother and Father on their wedding day, July 9, 1952*

I apologize, gentle reader, if I have left you wondering why my father, Lammert, did not emigrate with the rest of the family. Yes, Pieterdina and Piet had hidden away on the eve of departure, but my father stayed in Grootegast, our home back in 1952, with the full blessing and knowledge of my Opa. Lammert was his eldest son, and he and his new bride, Dieuwke, our mother, had decided to remain behind.

My parents married on the 9th July 1952. My grandfather and five of his children had sailed from the port of Rotterdam exactly one week earlier. Thus, on the day of my parents' wedding, the groom's father, and most of his brothers and sisters, were onboard ship, from which they telegraphed their best wishes on the day.

I suspect, knowing the hardship that the separation must have caused for my father, that he would have wished to leave for Canada as well. However, my mother's sister, brother and her mother, my Oma, provided great support as the new family made their start. My mother was born and raised in Pieterzijl, a lonely village of a few houses situated on a short lane on a canal near the North Sea. She was young, shy and lacked confidence, hallmarks of her entire life, and at the same time, quite stubborn, even by the standards of Protestant, North Sea town folk. I learned from relatives, many decades later, that on visits to my Opa's house during her courtship, she closeted herself in the guest room, afraid to interact with her betrothed's brothers and sisters. Her seeming stand-offishness created a chill on relations with my father's family that lasted for years. When Father's family emigrated, I doubt that my mother could have withstood the separation from her loved ones, and I think, thankfully now, that she held sway. So they stayed.

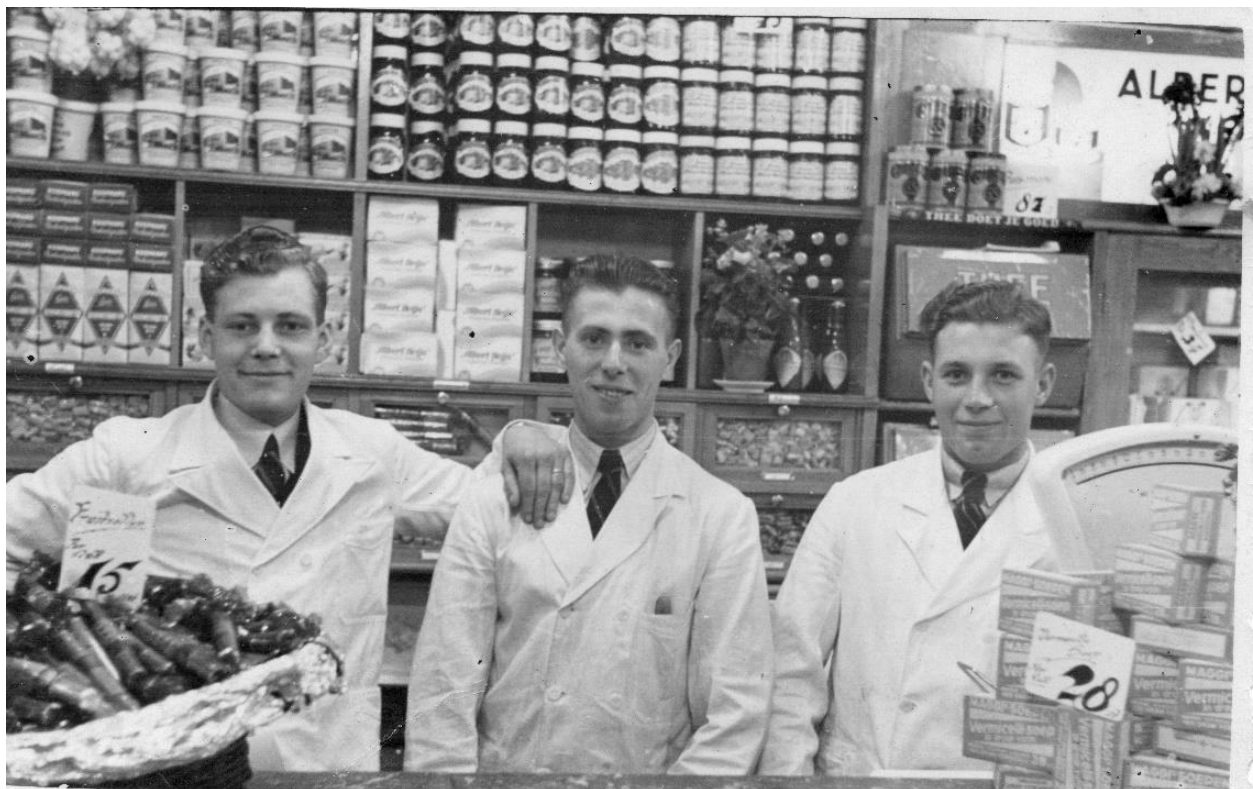
Mother and Father continued to run the family store in Grootegast, but the business ran into difficulty and was sold, and a new enterprise begun in Ten Boer in the fall of 1956. I was then three years old, and I have only the faintest recollection of Grootegast, my birthplace. I did visit Grootegast in 1984, but the family store no longer existed by that time. Our home and store in Ten Boer had also been replaced by the time of my first return visit, but just recently I located the store in an aerial photograph of Ten Boer made in 1955.



*Figure 10 - Our Centra grocery store, from a family photo album*



*Figure 11- From aerial photo of Ten Boer, 1955, highlighting our store*



*Figure 12 - My father, center, as an apprentice at Albert Hein*

In earlier days, Father had helped to run Opa's store in Grootegast, and after completing high school, he apprenticed with the Albert Hein grocery chain in the city of Groningen. There he completed courses in grocery store management, and later took certificate courses in the sale of commodities like coffee, chocolate and other items sold in bulk. I can't count how many times, in later years, he would advise my brothers and I to only buy chocolate bars that listed cocoa butter as an ingredient; cocoa powder being much inferior. This, whenever he encountered a chocolate bar in our possession. Of course, cocoa butter is rarely found in North American chocolate bars, but it's quite common in the Dutch chocolate you can find in any Dutch deli.

Childhood report cards evidenced that my mother had a very good mind for mathematics, and she managed the purchase of goods and pricing, and updated the ledgers, while also raising Piet and I, and later, the third son, Martin. My father was highly personable, and making delivery rounds on his bicycle in the surrounding countryside was his favourite task. He often took me along on these rounds, and gliding across the country side, perched on the rear of his bicycle was a great pleasure for me. I suspect that Father wasn't terribly efficient in making these deliveries, as I remember extended friendly visits with our customers. These visits were grand occasions from my



perspective. I particularly remember frequently sitting for tea with one elderly widow of our acquaintance. (Morning coffee and afternoon tea are held across the Netherlands at very specific times, and are also generally served in a very specific manner. All that needs to be said is "can you drop by at tea time?", and the time, the place, the addition of cookies or koek, and the look and arrangement of the tea service, are all implicit in the invitation.) This widow's home was an especially magical place for me: fine bone china, lace curtains, comfortable chairs, and pleasant warmth, even on cold, rainy days, nothing like the spartan fixtures and constant coolness of our own home. And, of course, the cookies. In this home, a second one was always offered, an uncommon occurrence and a special treat.



*Figure 13 - Living room interior in a Drenthe town*

My parents managed the store in Ten Boer for two and a half years, but the business required something more than my mother's ability to manage details and my father's personability. He was too easy going, and she not easy enough. My mother could be haughty with customers, and with my father's inability to track to task the store did not flourish. There was also competition directly across the street from us, a grocery store managed by a family named

Storteboom, who were already well established when my parents took over their store. Piet and I often played with their two sons, who were similar to us in age. Their mother was one of the good people, and by that I mean, in case you have not caught on to the term, friendly to children. It should be clear by now, that this was not a quality you could count on, in that day and age.

I learned much about our family history on my return trip in 1984, while visiting my Dutch relatives. We visited Ten Boer on that trip, and found that the Storteboom family had moved their store to a new and larger location. We dropped in, unannounced, now 25 years since our family had left the town. One of the Storteboom lads was in the store that day, and while he was curious about me, he had no apparent memory of our family, but he did summon Mrs. Storteboom who was working in a back office. Yes, she remembered us very well. There was a pondering silence between us for a minute or two, but then the floodgates opened. How are your parents? Where do you live? What kind of work do you do? And so the time flew. But we were conscious after a while, that we had interrupted a working day and there were customers to be managed and work to be done. How does one catch up on 25 years in such a brief visit? So it was time to go, but I left thinking that there would certainly be a future visit now that the ice had been broken. But alas, that never came, and this is all too often how life goes; the times when we can reconnect with the past are all too few and too brief, and years later when our curiosity is at a peak, and our own lived experience has aroused the more interesting and deeper questions, we realize that those we would like to visit again are long gone.

MY DUTCH OMA



*Figure 14 - Me, with my maternal grandmother, Maria de Vries*

Before my fourth birthday, I frequently had overnight visits at my maternal grandmother's house. She had moved from her home in Pieterzijl to live near Grootegast, my birthplace and first home. Oma loved a little fun, and we often played a game where she would remove her teeth, and then I, knowing nothing of the difference between actual teeth and dental plates, would try to remove mine. The game would begin with Oma showing me her upper plate and asking if I had figured out how to remove my own teeth since my last visit. Well, no, and I would try again to yank and twist out my teeth, to no avail. How was she able to do this, and so easily?

My aunt Sara, then known as Saartje, still lived with our Oma at that time. Although Sara was my mother's sister, she was closer to me in age. When I

turned 3 in May 1956, Saartje had just turned ten. Her older sister, my mother, was already 27. Sometimes Saartje supervised me when Oma was busy with housekeeping or preparing meals. On one particular afternoon, Saartje took me to a nearby windmill. At a distance these signature features of the Dutch landscape suggest a peaceful idyll. But seen up close, Dutch windmills are imposing edifices, very tall with massive sails that turn creakingly in a great circuit. A school friend called down to Sara from an open hatch above, and invited her to come inside. She was somewhat reluctant on my account, but well, what harm was there, so off she went. Not wanting to be left alone, I decided to follow. The windmill's interior was dark, damp and cramped. I followed Saartje up a small, steep ladder to the higher levels, all with openings in the floor without railings. Seen through an opening at eye level, the sails moved even faster and creaked more ominously than they did from the ground. This was not a pleasant experience at all, and I was relieved when our windmill sojourn ended, and we could return home. (See Note 3 on Grootegast).

My last visit with Oma ended abruptly, when she died overnight, in her sleep. For at least the next 20 years, this entire experience was erased from my memory. In the following years, through childhood and into my early adulthood, I never thought about my Dutch Oma at all, much less that I had been present at her deathbed as a boy not even four years old. One day, many years later, and already an adult, I thought again of the events surrounding her death, just as it had happened. The memory of Oma's death did not announce its return. The memory wasn't there, and then, it was. On our 1984 trip, when I first visited Tante Sara again, she told me of having a very similar experience in having blocked and then re-experiencing her memory of the event.

I had been with Oma and Saartje for a few days in March 1957. On the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, I woke late, and everything was off kilter. Normally, I would wake to an active household well into its morning routine, with a breakfast of hot oatmeal, and the warmth of my Oma and Saartje's companionship, awaiting my arrival. But all was far too quiet that morning, and the only sound came from Saartje, weeping. She was then just shy of her eleventh birthday. Oma was lying in bed, very pale and still, and Saartje was imploring her to wake up. Which Oma would not, and could not, do.

This was all so strange to me. In her distress Sara did not notice me, and her weeping made me feel deeply sad, but at that age, I had no real understanding of death. Not much time passed, and neighbours came, and before too long, the house was bustling with people, trying to comfort Sara, and mainly not saying too much to the little boy trying to puzzle out what was going on.

I think that most young children always feel the presence of those that love them. They may not be right there with you, but there's always a point at which they return into your presence. So now, while not having experience or knowledge to process that Oma had died, I did feel a sense of separation that I had never felt before.

Later that morning, a lovely woman, who I recognized at the time, but whose name and sense of place in our family has been lost to time, took me by bus to her warm and comfortable house in the city of Groningen. My memory of all I had seen faded into nothing, and as I mentioned, was lost for decades. I was in this lady's home for a good while, as my parents dealt with the funeral and the mourning period. My mother was also well advanced into pregnancy, with her third child, at that time.

I can still feel the warmth and exceptional care and attention I received during those days in a city home. I had my first experience with modern plumbing, and an indoor porcelain toilet. So pleasant, and easy to use compared to the outhouse in Ten Boer. You stayed warm the whole time, no danger of falling in, and no smell: a handle flushed every trace of fecal odour away. The days went by, and eventually this lovely lady, absolutely one of the good people, took me on another bus ride, and I was home again.

I have reason to think, though I am not certain, that I stayed in that Groningen home for a period that amounted to several weeks. My mother was pregnant at the time, and on March 16, eleven days after the passing of Maria de Vries, my Dutch Oma, a third boy was born in our family. Home birth is the general practice in the Netherlands. A Dutch midwife once explained this to me on the basis of, "what do doctors know about birthing babies anyway?" Given that they only become involved when extraordinary measures are required, the answer necessarily becomes, "not much". When my youngest brother was born years later in Canada, I was whisked away to my Canadian Oma's for a period of weeks. "Mother is not well and needs rest" was the explanation, and when I returned home, a new brother had miraculously

appeared. I was nine at that time. Based on the later experience, it seems likely that I was in Groningen from the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, until after March 16<sup>th</sup>.

In the months that followed, all was not well. I would wake frequently to the baby's cries, and I sensed that my mother was crying also. In August, tragedy struck. Our new little brother died. I was told, years later, upon asking, that the child had died of pneumonia. In subsequent years, my parents never spoke of the event, never even mentioned it. It's only now, so many decades later, that I have a sense of the measure of grief my mother must have borne, with a dear mother and a child passing within months. Relatives have indicated to me that the event was a turning point for her. Already a shy person, my mother became ever more reclusive, meeting a minimum of social intercourse required to pay bills, buy groceries, and run the household. Her refuge was in attending church and its various societies, returning always to a very solitary existence as a home-maker.

#### OOM HENK COMES TO VISIT

The winter of 1958 and early 1959 was brightened by a visit from my Dad's much younger brother, and my namesake uncle, Oom Henk, on a return visit to Holland, from his new home in Alberta, Canada. I knew nothing, then, of my father's family, but they had been living in Canada for six years and were becoming established there. At the time, Oom Henk was just a random young man who showed up at our house, bringing some sunshine following what had been a difficult year.

One small incident still stands out. We had received a dusting of snow, which always caused some consternation. While snow in northern Holland is not uncommon, I don't remember ever seeing a snow shovel in use, as they are here in Canada. I do know that Father had a long session in mind with a broom. Oom Henk from Canada to the rescue. "This is nothing, let me show you how this is done." Henk then made very short work of the snow by madly swinging the broom back and forth to clear the back yard in minutes. Henk had boundless optimism and cheer and a perfunctory attitude to all challenges, hallmarks of his personality all his life.

In years to come when I visited Oom Henk, he often asked if I remembered his visit to our home in the Netherlands. "Of course", I said. "You still remember that, heh", he would say, and then emit a drawn out "tjaah", as his mind drifted for a moment to those times, long past.



*Figure 15 - Oom Henk, 1980*

To further add to my parents' woes, I endured a fairly serious personal calamity that year. Ten Boer's eastern entry point had a broad open square through which traffic entered the town from the major motorway running nearby. This square is quite apparent in the aerial photograph of Ten Boer, and remains a central feature to this day.

My parents were holding my hand at the edge of the town square, when something or other, the specifics of which are long forgotten, attracted my attention, and quite suddenly I darted away to have a look. A very loud alarm from my parents ringing in my ears wasn't enough to prevent me running directly into the path of a bicycle crossing the square at speed. Then followed: extreme pain, my Dad running and arriving at the scene first, and a great deal of consternation from mother and father and some bystanders. My left leg had fractured above the knee and I subsequently spent many weeks in a full-length plaster cast. However, other than the event itself and some episodes of extreme itchiness and some rash, this wasn't a bad period of my life. I contented myself with bed rest, looking at books and playing with the few toys I possessed. The day came for the cast to be removed. That was extremely painful, not so much the removal itself, but being forced to walk on my now

withered leg, sending sharp needles of pain through my body. Another week, and that was over also.

That was my worst childhood injury, but there were others. I have a lifelong scar extending from my chin to my left lip that has become more pronounced with the years. We had an area in the rear of our house where my parents fermented sauerkraut. My adventuring spirit took me back there one day, and I tripped and fell, breaking some of the earthenware used to ferment the 'kraut'. A shard of pottery tore my chin, and a trip to the doctor for stitches followed.

Other misdeeds had a more comic turn. I fell into the ditch beside our yard, and was completely drenched and covered in duckweed. This earned a mid afternoon trip to the bedroom, a welcome respite given how exhausted I felt. It would seem, from all my memories, and by safety standards nowadays, that our house back then was replete with many hazards. We also had a coal bin somewhere or other in the building, a necessary accessory to our coal stove. It seems I did have to learn so many things the hard way, and playing in the coal bin was one more of these. What a mess. When I now think back on all these events, I realize that I caused no minor amount of consternation for my mother, not to mention being a constant clean-up project. Such are the joys of parenting a curious and impetuous child.





*Figure 16 - Allies welcome poster from my father's archives*

#### THE LONG SHADOW OF THE WAR

While driving on the A5 motorway near Amsterdam on a recent visit, a police vehicle pulled in front of me, with rear window signage flashing some Dutch words in red, which I think said, “follow me”. No doubt, I thought, the vehicle was guiding traffic either through a construction area, or around newly painted lines, or through a reduced speed area, in a fashion similar to how that’s done in Canada. So, when the police vehicle pulled over toward an exit lane, I simply continued in my lane. Immediately, the police car engaged its flashing light, rocketed past my vehicle, and pulled back in front of me.

Obviously, I had read that one incorrectly, and immediately, I pulled over to the shoulder. The policeman pulled up ahead of me, jumped out of his car, and was at my window in a flash. "Volg mij, meneer" he said sternly, and I could tell he was holding back his anger. Sitting penitently in his car, as I handed him my driver's licence, I tried to explain in broken Dutch how I had misinterpreted the situation, and that where I come from, a pullover is executed from behind, and the police cars have a cherry on top, and so on. I gestured in a circle with my finger and made a woo-woo sound. "Canadees?" his partner asked, as she examined my driver's licence. I could sense a sudden softening from both police officers as she said this. They shifted to English, in which they were very accomplished, and the entire mood and the conversation changed. They were both curious about my background, what we were up to in Holland, and so on. From 'extremely ticked off' to 'friendly' in one moment. This, I have come to learn, is the "Canadian effect", the lasting good will of an entire country's citizens to its war time liberators, that, at the time of this incident, had occurred 57 years before. What looked like a very serious situation for me, turned into a "we'll let it go this time", and a friendly chat. The officers wished me well, provided a few travel tips, and everything was smiles for them, and colossal relief for me, as we parted.

I had experienced the Canadian effect before. On that first trip back to the Netherlands, 18 years previously, I had stopped in a cheese shop to purchase a large-ish segment of a Gouda cheese wheel that was intended to last us for the duration of a 4 week European camping trip.



*Figure 17 - It barely lasted a week, but hey, just buy some more!*

My broken Dutch aroused the curiosity of the older proprietor of the shop, and on learning I was a Canadian, he refused payment and, with tears

welling in his eyes, passed on some personal recollections of the war. I had no heart to refuse the gift, given the outpouring of emotion, but I felt some guilt at the unmerited favour bestowed on me. I had never faced German troops and had nothing to do with the liberation of the country from Nazi oppression. In fact, my own family had benefitted from the liberation in the same way that he had. Nevertheless, it has been a pleasure to witness personally and tangibly, the long-standing good will and gratitude of my birth country's citizens toward its liberators from Canada, my own country of citizenship, and my home for the great majority of my life.

The war threw a long-standing shadow across the lives of my parents, and my extended family, and the story of their war time experience unveiled itself very gradually through the years. What had it been like for my parents and family to live through the second World War, when their land was occupied by the fascists for five long years beginning with the bombing of Rotterdam in May 1940, soon followed by the surrender of the entire country, and then, increasing hardship year over year, until the final liberation in May 1945?

The lasting effects of this experience varied by the family and by the individual: from a life time of hoarding goods and groceries for some, due to dealing with the scarcity of basic essentials, to extremely painful memories or PTSD, for those who suffered the most, either at the centre of the conflict, or confined in Nazi internment camps, or sent to work sites in Germany. At the same time, and in stark contrast to these effects, the first post war years also brought a 'joie de vivre' and sense of relief beginning with VE Day and lasting through the following decade.

There was not much talk about war experiences, within our family immediately after the war. For some, retelling meant reliving, and was too painful. More generally, Dutch immigrants, and, in particular, our extended family wanted to direct their energy to building a new life, and not dwell on the past. The war lessons that we did learn were on the broad history and major events of the war, generally in the form of lessons at school, and movies and books. My father, and his generation, had a strong intention that we learn moral lessons on liberty and its price, and that we honour those who paid that price through acts of service, and often, with their very lives. We, as children, needed to understand the history, and remember and prevent fascism and its horrors from ever happening again. By contrast to the formal lessons, the

personal experience of our parents and their peers were related only on rare occasion. This reluctance to speak surely did leave some to suffer silently with trauma induced stress and other kinds of dysfunction, but as children we did not see this. Instead, we would watch movies like 'Bridge on the River Kwai', one of our father's favourites. But when we were older, Father related to us that one of the Dutch immigrants in our city had suffered in a Japanese POW camp in Indonesia, and hated the movie because it glossed just how terrible the conditions actually were. We obtained from books and movies of the war, a single broad narrative based on certain key events: D Day, the Holocaust, the Russian front, and more pertinent to our home country: Anne Frank, Corrie ten Boom, the bombing of Rotterdam, the Canadian troops in Holland, and *A Bridge Too Far*, the movie about Operation Market Garden at Arnhem. Those were the big stories, but each person who lived through that time also had their own story, and this was true also of my family.

My grandfather's house was in the countryside about 20 kilometers west of the capital city of Groningen, near the town of Leek. In the late 1930s, a sense of foreboding was general in the Netherlands, as the Nazis assimilated Czechoslovakia and then, Austria. Everyone's worst fears were realized in the fall of 1939, on the news that the Nazis invaded Poland, and soon after, England and France declared war on Germany. The Netherlands had declared its neutrality, and the Dutch clung to a faint hope that the country would remain so, as it had through the entirety of the first World War. And there was a brief respite, but only until May of the following year, when the Luftwaffe bombed and completely destroyed the city center of Rotterdam.

My Canadian Oma, Neeltje Stigter, who met and married my widower grandfather in Canada, told me decades later of sitting on a lake side bench with family in the town of De Lier, just east of The Hague, watching the sky to the east fill with flames as Rotterdam was bombed by the Luftwaffe, and burned. She, her family, and the entire small country of the Netherlands sank into despair.

My father, the eldest son in the family, was 11 years old at the time, living near Leek. Surrender followed very soon after the carpet bombing of Rotterdam. Hitler did consider the Dutch to be part of the Aryan master race, and the country was run by an amalgam of the German military and existing Dutch officials. The formal government and monarchs had gone into exile in

London. The country was now ruled by fascists, with the treacherous and much hated Austrian Nazi, Arthur Seyss-Inquart as Reichskommissar.

At first, not much changed for the average Dutch person, other than moving to complete fascist one party rule. However, by 1942, food was on rations in much of the country, agricultural output was turned to supporting Germany and the war effort, and young Dutch men were conscripted to work in German munitions plants and other factories. My father, the oldest son, and all my uncles, were not at conscription age, and as the screw turned ever tighter, my grandfather's family was too young to be pulled apart as many families were. Food supplies were requisitioned by the Nazi's to a greater extent as the war progressed, and the family's diet became more restricted, but local produce and dairy products were available to them, in contrast with city populations.

Over the years, my father passed on various recollections of this time. In one of his class photographs, he pointed out a few young friends who had been killed by the Nazi's. There were stories of atrocities being committed in Groningen, confirmed after the war, Dutch resisters summarily executed, and their bodies tossed into the peat bogs. One of my older relatives, Ritze Vos, worked with the Dutch resistance, and was decorated after the war for participating in a war time raid on a Nazi jail. Such efforts were met with severe reprisals, which discouraged the underground's effort. Most notable was the reprisal on the town of Putten, after an ambush of a Nazi officer's car by the Dutch underground. 602 adult males from that town were deported to German camps and over 90% never returned.

As the war progressed, it became my father's job to visit the neighbours each evening, listen to the British radio newscast on their clandestine radio, and relay to my Opa, and the family, progress on the Allied war effort. In the latter part of the war, Father often saw massive waves of Lancaster bombers filling the skies of the northern Netherlands on their way to bombing runs in Germany.

The late months of the war became much more severe in the cities of the Netherlands, including the nearby city of Groningen. Thousands died of starvation during the 'winter hunger' of early 1945. People ate anything to survive including tulip bulbs, and in some cases, dogs and cats. Our Tante Jantje or Jannie, who married my uncle Meerten in Canada, lived in the city of Groningen during that period, and told us of picking cigarette butts out of the

ashen grey bread that was rationed to them, and then later, even those rations stopped. In the later years of the war, they often had little or nothing to eat.

In the spring of 1945, Canadian troops progressed northward through the Netherlands, surmounting enemy resistance as they went. The city of Groningen was one of the German soldiers' last major bastions. As bridges had been knocked out, Canadian troops progressed along a route that ran from south to north along the east side of a major canal, and thus, the conflict remained safely away from Opa's house off to the west. The family was well aware of the advance of Canadian troops as word spread of their success. Air landings were made near Assen in Drenthe, a bit to the south, on the 8th of April. By the 13th of April, 14,000 Canadian troops were on the doorstep of the city of Groningen, and on the 16th, 5200 German soldiers surrendered in the provincial capital. Another 2000 soldiers fled from the area.

Over breakfast one morning, just a few years ago, our Tante Jantje, or Jannie, told us the following story. In the days and weeks after the surrender in Groningen, she often played near a Canadian war barracks. A Canadian soldier, who had observed her hanging around, brought her a slice of bread from the canteen along with some butter. Most Dutch people of that place and time recount the effect of first seeing white, delicious Canadian bread, sometimes dropped by plane to help feed the starving Dutch population. But Tante Jannie could only look wistfully at this amazing slice of very white bread in her one hand and the butter in her other. "Ah", the soldier said, as he suddenly recognized the problem, retreated into the barracks, and returned shortly with a table knife. Butter could now be applied to bread, and then into a blissful union with Jannie's tongue. Thus preoccupied, Jannie did not notice the soldier slipping away to return to his duties. So there she was, wondering what to do with the table knife. She was much too shy to enter the barracks, and so, as she concluded her story to us, she held up her table knife, and said "this is the knife, and every morning since I have buttered my bread with it".

Thankfully the passage of time has a healing effect on bad memories and they can even seem surreal after a time. People wonder about the war, "did that really happen, and to us"? Physical mementoes help to preserve the reality of the experience, and that reality must be kept alive to keep the horror of war from reasserting itself in future times. It's often said that the next war will begin when the last one has been forgotten. Lest we forget.

DE RAMP



*Figure 18 - De Ramp, the photo that puzzled me*

When my parents passed away not many years ago, I came into possession of several relics I had not seen since my early childhood. One of these was a photo book, called 'De Ramp', that would be unusual for a young child to possess today. In turning and viewing the pages of this book as a young child, I felt out of joint with my own experience. Why were there so many cows, lying dead in the field, surrounded by water on all sides? The cows that I knew were alive and stood in the fields glistening in the sun. Although they were large and imposing with their cud chewing jaws and immense udders, they were as much a part of the fabric of the countryside as the tall grass they stood in, and the ditches and canals of water which quenched their thirst. And why were people sitting in motorboats, huddled with layers of winter clothing? And there was Prince Bernhard arriving with a helicopter in the middle of it all. That seemed exciting. I did not have enough sense to fully process these images then, and that was just as well. In later years, I learned more about the great flood in southern Holland during

February 1953, when a massive North Sea storm breached the vast network of dikes and inundated the land right to the rooftops. Over 1800 people perished, and 70,000 were evacuated. (See note 1).

WE REJOIN OUR CANADIAN FAMILY

In the two decades after World War II, half a million people left the Netherlands, mainly to settle in Canada, Australia, the USA, and South Africa. Why did so many leave? I have asked this question on occasion, and the answer often boils down to this: "to build a better life". And this is an honest answer. The war had severely damaged infrastructure and residential areas. The reconstruction was slow, and there was anxiety about jobs and housing for younger people. But the Netherlands did rebuild, and those that did not leave, also found peace and a new prosperity in the optimistic post-war years. And yet, this can't be the complete answer. I heard one answer that I believe, on further consideration, must have played a significant part. "People were bored and they were young; often they were motivated by a sense of adventure". Certainly, many of the trailblazers to the new countries had lost their livelihood or their business enterprise in the Netherlands. Here in Canada, the Dutch postwar immigrants, some with transplanted wealth, found an opportunity to build market gardens, landscaping yards, lumber yards, real estate firms, trucking companies, farms and factories in a younger, more open country. Many other, perhaps most, Dutch emigres did not have a single, clear objective, but did bring a restless energy looking for an outlet, and often found it.

No doubt, my own grandfather had significant motivation to move his family to Canada in the summer of 1952. He had lost his wife shortly after the war, in 1947, at just 40 years of age. And now he had eight children, some of them near working age, without suitable employment prospects. Opa often spoke of the tangible ways in which Canada had granted him a new lease on life after the bleak war and post-war years.

I have described how my father, as the oldest son, soon to be married, had decided, in 1952, to remain in the Netherlands. But just short of seven years later, in May 1959, my parents did decide to join Opa's family, which was then nicely settled in southeastern Alberta. At that time, I was just shy of my sixth birthday, Pete was five, and Martin was still a baby, at about 8 months. Our youngest brother, Will, was born in Canada in early 1961.

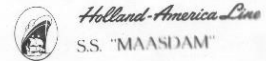


(I should explain that there were two children named Martin. The first was born in March 1957 and died that August. The second Martin was born in August 1958, and that's who I mention in the preceding paragraph. And, while it would be uncommon today to re-use a name when a child has passed away, this was a general practice years ago, as I've seen in looking at older church records of births while researching our family tree.)

The intervening years, for 1952 to 1959, had been difficult financially, and it seemed the country's progress was slow. By comparison, the extended family was prospering in the new land. The prospects for the store in Ten Boer were not great, and there were frequent difficult meetings with the representative from the Centra chain to which our store belonged (See note 2). And so, the decision was made to join Opa's family in Alberta, Canada. By 1959 the ocean crossing to Canada was much more comfortable than those experienced by earlier immigrants who crossed on refitted cargo ships. The S.S. Maasdam was a purpose-built passenger ocean liner, sailing on its maiden voyage in 1958. As comfortable as it was in its day, this ship should not be confused with the cruise ship, S.S. Maasdam, that still sails today. The original S.S. Maasdam was a smaller ship, and was eventually sold to the Polish Ocean Lines when the emigrant boom ended.



*Figure 19 - On board ship, L to R, Me, my father, Piet*



*Figure 20 - Yes, that's me, tugging the hardest.*

After our family departed from our home in Ten Boer, we were delayed for a number of weeks in Rotterdam due to a mix-up with our inoculations. My mother's brother, also named Henk, was a police officer living in Rotterdam, and accommodated us through that time. Was this to be our future life, I wondered? That would have been just fine for a five-year-old boy who enjoyed the change to a new urban setting, and the constant camaraderie of our kind cousins. But the day of departure arrived, and with my uncle's family assembled dockside, we boarded ship and sailed out. We really were not told or prepared for any aspect of the voyage or the family's plans, not that any of that mattered at my age. I was too caught up in the excitement of the process to think very much about the future implications.

The journey took seven days by ship across the Atlantic, and then, five more days across Canada, by train. As I remember it, I had no problem entertaining myself for most of the trip. One day a party was held on board ship. Piet and I wore party hats and participated in a tug of war, and other games. We also often played shuffleboard with our mother on the top deck.

Later in the trip we encountered rough seas. Each night of the journey we had been seated at long tables for our evening supper, but as the stormy days drew on, seasickness made its imprint and the numbers present at our table declined. On a few occasions, when the stormy seas were at their worst, I was the lone family diner. Seasickness has never been an infirmity for me, and I enjoyed the wonderful chef-prepared dinners on board ship, with or without my family present.

Where were we headed? Still no idea. If my parents did explain anything to Piet or myself, I have no particular recollection of it. And although we received loving attention from our mother in unprecedented abundance, now that she was removed from day to day cares and running of the store, I also recall that my parents were often upset with me for no apparent reason. One day I found a comfortable bench at the rear of the ship, where I sat for quite a long time enjoying the ocean view, when up rushed my very perturbed parents. According to them, I had gotten lost on ship, and they had spent a long time looking for me. All news to me. A similar incident occurred when the ship finally arrived and docked in Montreal, Quebec. I was fascinated watching cranes unloading cargo, swinging large nets with baskets of goods, from deep in the hold, then up and onto the dock. I had paused on the long departure ramp as the family disembarked. As they were fussing with luggage and determining where to go next, they had not noticed that I was not with them, and had to retrace their steps to find me. Sheesh, why so upset?

We made our way to the train station where we had to wait for a day or so before we could board the train that would travel 4000 kilometres to southern Alberta. Our mother bought a pair of toy trucks for Pete and myself. For us to receive toys outside of birthday or Sinterklaas was very unusual. Moving house was a costly affair, and funds were scarce. But our few toys had been packed into a shipping crate with our household effects long before we left the country, so we were very pleased with this gift. The toy trucks had a wind up motor and Piet and I spent the longest time sitting yards apart on the waiting room floor, rolling our trucks back and forth to each other. I remember that we were in Montreal for quite a long time, perhaps a day or two, so the diversion created by the trucks was money well spent for our wearying Mother.

Travelling across Canada by train was not at all like the bustling and efficient affair experienced when one took the train in Holland. The train

crossed the country at a languid, but never-ending pace, through great stretches of forest and lake, but then stopping for long stretches of time to refuel, change locomotives and crews, and discharge or board new passengers. As train journeys in Canada were lengthy affairs for most passengers, boarding with luggage, stowing it, and finding and settling into seats were unrushed activities. Many passengers had berths or cabins, but we rode in coach. Many of the stewards were Black, and this was a point of fascination, since our only past exposure had been to blackface Zwarte Piets. Any trepidation that lingered around the stewards due to the tales about the sinister Zwarte Piet were soon dispelled, as I saw how friendly and helpful the stewards were to my parents, and attentive to us, mere children.

The view from our window as we slipped silently across northern Ontario was an endless cycle of snow and trees, broken only on occasion by towns or the occasional human being. Then, the flat Prairies. Finally, one night we were shaken awake from our sleep, and told that we had arrived at our final destination: Medicine Hat, Alberta. Friendly and smiling faces greeted us on the platform, and there was one that I already knew: the friendly face of Oom Henk, who had visited us a few months previously in Holland. How was it that he now came to be here, in the middle of nowhere? He certainly got around.

In the car we went, to Opa's house, 521 Broadway, Redcliff, Alberta. As I lay in the back seat of the car all I could see was the tops of telephone poles as we passed by. Although I was sleepy and tired from the lateness of the hour, a rest came over me. I did feel tired, but also, very safe. The family welcome made everything seem okay, and although they were new to me in that hour, that family was to be very important in the years to come, providing familiarity and a safe haven in a new country. The nest had already been prepared by Opa, Oom Henk and the others.

A new story was about to begin.



*Figure 21 - Our Canadian family, circa 1954*

L to R, standing - Opa, Martin (Meerten), Bill (Willem), Henk (Hendrik),  
seated - Jackie (Tjaakje), Tina (Trientje)

#### LIONS' REPRISE

Not long after we arrived, I saw the lions' chair again, in my grandparents' living room. We were living in the basement of that house, waiting many months for our shipping crate that never seemed to arrive, and saving to get some money ahead to rent our first house. I was soon to be six years old, and understood the impossibility of actual lions emerging from the chair arms at night, but still, that chair made me uneasy. We often visited together in the living room, with Opa and Oma and with whichever uncles and aunts were around, and sometimes I was allowed to watch television there. On entry, I would always cut a wide berth around the chair, and sit well away from it.

At the time I couldn't really see the point of that chair; no one ever sat in it. The chair was a family heirloom passed down to my Oma, fashioned from

oak, with the lions' heads carved into the arms, and more carvings recessed into a high cross piece that served as the back rest. But there was no back support, and a child of my age could easily fall through. Also, the arms were much too high, even for an adult. One day, when I was in the room alone, I had a thought. Why not sit in the chair? And so, I did. When I swim, I never dive into the water; I gradually coax my skinny, shivering body in, and this was how I approached the chair. And then, there I was, sitting in the centre on the edge of the seat, and now, back in the seat, and then with my arms, right on the lions' heads, stroking them.

I was now at an age where I began to see magic as fantasy, a state to be imagined, but not to be lived in, and quite distinct from reality. But that change took place in a new country. The country of my birth has remained in my mind as a place with a particular and real magic, where lions were encased in chair arms by day, and wandered at night, Sinterklaas was a scary bishop first, and then a kind, gentle man; pickled and cured fish was more delicious than any sweet treat, although there were many of those as well; and days were either bright with colour and sunshine, or gloomy with steady rain and ominous storms. And now in my elder years, I prefer, in spite of all I have learned since, to see it precisely in that manner.



*Figure 22 – Revisit to Gaykinga Straat, Ten Boer*

L to R, our son Will, Tante Sara, and the author, 2019, on Gaykinga Straat, Ten Boer, at the former location of our store.

NOTE 1. DE RAMP.

The response of the Dutch government to De Ramp was to build a massive outer seawall, costing billions, that fully enclosed and protected the entire country of the Netherlands. On one of my trips, I made a point of visiting the Delta Works tourist centre, containing a fascinating exhibit on the seawall, its plan and structure, and the equipment, material and methods used to build it. To understand how ambitious this project was, consider that, while keeping out sea waters is an obvious imperative, rainwater and river flow, still have to go somewhere. Otherwise, the outer seawall would do nothing more than turn the country into a massive swimming pool. From ancient days, windmills have been used to pump drainage canals back up to sea level and out to the sea. Today, that function is performed by pumphouses with pumping equipment. In addition, large moveable liftgates were required to allow rivers like the Rhine and Maas to flow out at low tide. Migratory species of the sea needed to access the numerous estuaries of the province Zeeland so these could not be simply closed in, as the Zuider Zee had been years before. The entire project was not just a seawall, but a very complex enclosure and drainage system.

Water is ever present in the Dutch landscape and manifests itself in innumerable ways, from unexpected minutes spent sitting in your car, waiting for a slow barge to pass through an open bridge, to a reliance on barges instead of tandem trucks, to move heavy materials, to fierljeppen competitions, essentially pole vaulting across canals. The last is a sport that evolved from the practice of Dutch farmers carrying and using a long pole to vault across the drainage channels that criss-crossed their fields. Out of that experience, combined with a competitive instinct, fierljeppen competitions were born. Water is so ingrained into the Dutch experience that they give it only passing thought from day to day, but with our family now living in a near-desert, arid part of Canada, the presence of water and its effect on day to day life and on culture, stands in sharp relief.

NOTE 2. CENTRA

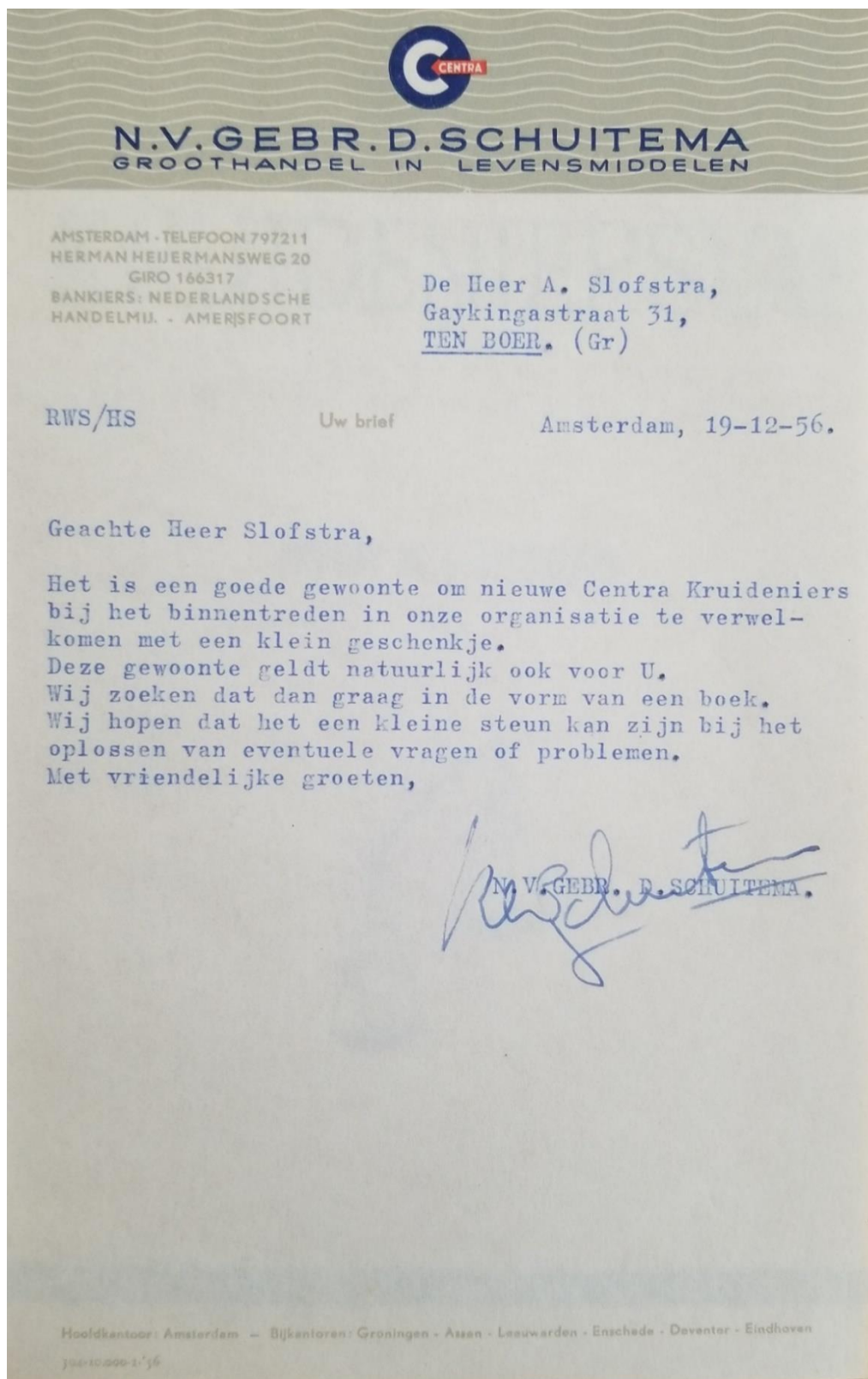
The story of Centra, from Wikipedia.

In 1888, Jacob Fokke Schuitema started a food store on the Damsterdiep in Groningen. In 1916 this resulted in the foundation of the Gebroeders D. Schuitema company by Detmer and Dirk Eildert Schuitema. These were Jacob Fokke's cousins.

In 1931, Schuitema took the initiative to bundle the purchasing power of twelve wholesalers across the country. The intention was to create a large partnership between retailers and wholesalers. They developed a retail formula for the entrepreneurs, who at that time did business themselves with their central purchasing office. This partnership started in 1933 under the name Centra. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, Schuitema and Centra grew strongly.

At the end of the 1970s, growth slowed down considerably. Because the economy is deteriorating, customers are opting for cheaper competitors. Schuitema decides to embark on a new course: the company develops the supermarket formula C1000. From 1981, the Centra stores were gradually replaced by C1000. The last Centra supermarket closed on December 1, 2001.[1]





*Figure 23 - Welcome letter to my father from Centra, 1956*

*My Story, Part 1, the Netherlands*

NOTE 3. GROOTEGAST

The house where my Oma, Maria de Vries, passed away still stands in Grootegast. In the foreground is a patch of 'boerenkool', a unique variety of kale. It's not usually harvested until winter.



*Figure 24 - Home of Maria de Vries in 1957, photo 2023*



*Figure 25 - Historic windmill in the Grootegast area, 1920a*



*Figure 26 - Windmill in Grootegast, 2023*

The windmill on the preceding page was more like the one I climbed inside as a young boy. The photo shows the scale of the building in relation to surrounding houses. This particular windmill burned down in the 1920s. A smaller modern day windmill is shown above.

PHOTO CREDITS

*Aerial photo of Ten Boer*

Cultuur Historische Vereniging Ten Boer

*Sinterklaas is Coming to Town*

Groninger Archieven

*Groningen Children with St. Martinus lanterns, 1950*

Piet Boonstra, permission pending

*Photos in Note 3 on Grootegast*

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All other photos, personal collection of the Slofstra family,

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