

Escaping the Nazis

BY DAVID TABATSKY

"After a year of dreading the inevitable but mostly never imagining that such a bad dream could come true, it finally had happened. On Friday, May 10, 1940, Germany had invaded our country, just one day before my Bar Mitzvah."

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY to Sal," they sang in loud, playful voices, "Happy Birthday to you!" It was May 5, 1940, and I was now 13 years old. In the Netherlands, birthdays are major events, and if anyone forgets, it's a big, fat blunder. My mother made sure everyone was there: aunts, uncles, cousins, family friends, and most important, Louis and Daniel, and of course, Tinie, doting on me as only an older sister can. "Take your time, little brother," she whispered. "It's your choice."

"Make a wish, Sal, come on!"

Both of my brothers wrapped their arms around me, pressing me against the table where the cake was on display. I closed my eyes and prepared to blow out the candles. A slight smile must have been visible on my face, and Daniel wasted no time noticing.

"What's her name, Sal?"

"Oh, forget it, kid," said Louis. "If you have to wish for a girlfriend, it'll never happen."

"Leave him alone, boys," said Tinie. "Sal can have any girl he wants!"

Marching Boots and Heavy Hearts

By the time I went to sleep, there was still no trace of the German army marching its way into Amsterdam. The streets were quiet. No one knew the Nazis' strategy and how soon they would enter the city.

I had never even met a German. I was in bed, thinking hard. Oh, but of course I had. Some new kids at school that year came from Germany. They were normal kids, though. They had to learn to speak Dutch, but we knew some German so we could communicate a few things between us, and we all got along. We were nice to them, and vice-versa. They had no reason to dislike us and tell people back in Germany that their army should attack us. That was a silly idea, so I dropped it and fell asleep.

The next morning, my father decided it was safe for me to go to my weekly gymnastics class as I usually did, but walking on my normal path to the school, I sensed something different in the air. On a typical Sunday morning the streets were filled with people walking to their respective churches. Jewish people were often out and about, attending to certain errands they had no time for during their busy working week or on the Sabbath.

On this Sunday, just one day after the Germans had crossed our border, hardly anyone was out. The few people I saw were huddled together, talking quietly, as if they were concerned that someone might overhear them. I wondered what they could have been talking about so secretly but I had to hurry to avoid being late.

As I neared the gymnasium, the sound of a police siren made me jump. I saw nothing wrong and kept walking toward the school. There must have been some normal crime going on, like someone stealing something from a store, or perhaps someone had a car accident and the police were rushing by to help, doing their job as usual.

What would it be like if the German army just

suddenly rounded the corner and marched down the street, with hundreds and hundreds of soldiers in a line with their rifles and tanks rolling behind them, firing their guns in any direction they wanted? The image of it sent chills up my spine, and I had to laugh at myself for picturing something so outrageous. It was not going to happen like that. They never would actually come all the way here to Amsterdam. No way. Enough of the fantasy already. I guess I had been reading too many cheap adventure books. I reminded myself to get to gymnastics, and not to be late.

Thankfully, the next few hours gave me a chance to forget about all the terrible things I feared might happen. Exercising and participating in all the activities Mr. Koen laid out for us took me far away from any imagined world of impending doom. None of the boys spoke about what had occurred, especially because Mr. Koen kept us so busy, working us out on one apparatus after another until we were all exhausted.

I trudged home, tired from gymnastics and all the extra excitement surrounding my Bar Mitzvah, and especially from worrying about my father and of all his fears. I wondered which of his theories would turn out to be true.

At the same time I was walking home, considering what I might eat for lunch, I had no idea that Queen Wilhelmina, the entire royal family, and most of the Dutch government officials were quickly packing up everything they could and preparing to flee to London before they were all captured and imprisoned by the Nazis.

Our house seemed normal when I returned. Mama was cooking in the kitchen. My sister was sewing, and my two brothers were playing chess in the living room. Papa came out of his room to greet me and then disappeared. Throughout the rest of the day, he stayed glued to the radio, waiting for the next piece of bad news. He did not even eat dinner with the rest of us.

"Mama, please let me get Papa. He must be hungry."

"Stay here. He won't come. The news is worsening every hour and he has no appetite."

"But he has to eat."

"Don't worry," Tinie said. "He'll eat when he's ready. For now, he has bigger things on his mind."

Daniel interrupted. "Can I please explain?" Mama nodded. She seemed so worried. I had never seen her look so heavy in her heart. "You see, Sal, the Dutch government has just officially departed from its historically neutral position and declared war on Germany," Louis and Tinie sighed. Mama closed her eyes and waited for Daniel to continue. "Our armies have been fighting as best as they can on many fronts. In spite of a few small victories, it's becoming more and more clear that they will eventually crumble because of Germany's superior military—too much firepower."

It was silent for a moment until my mother spoke. "Well said, Daniel. Okay, my dears, there's nothing we can do about this right now, so please finish your dinner."

A short time later, I tried to go to sleep but all I could imagine was a pair of big black boots pounding up the stairs to my bedroom. I tossed and turned, trying to erase the awful fantasy of these Germans taking me out of my bed in the middle of the night. Before the sun had even risen on Monday, we were all shocked awake by the sounds of planes droning overhead, air raid sirens blaring, and what we thought must have been bombs exploding in the heart of Amsterdam.

No one I knew had any idea what a bomb sounded like when it went off. However, with all those planes flying above us and the blasts and explosions that followed just a few heartbeats later, we all concluded, and correctly so, that our beloved hometown was being bombarded. It seemed like the bombs were dropping on another side of town but all we could do was hope we



I loved my sister but, in that moment, my mind was far away from any thoughts of girls. I was wishing for one thing, and one thing on-

ly—that every birthday I would ever have would be celebrated with all of these people, together, as one big family. As I blew out the

flames, and the house became totally dark for an instant, everyone cheered and applauded for me. They were happy to have a reason to

were right and that the terrible explosions would not happen any closer to us—but they did. We ran downstairs into the basement of our building, hoping to escape from the effects of the bombing. As we sat together, huddled next to some old furniture and a rusty boiler, none of us said a word. The German air force was attacking key manufacturing sites on the outskirts of the city, and luckily none fell directly near our neighborhood.

A policeman startled us when he appeared in the doorway of the basement. “You can go upstairs now,” he said matter-of-factly. “The bombs won’t fall here.”

“How can you be so sure?” said Louis. “You’re a Dutch policeman, not a German bombardier!”

“Louis!” Mama said. “Sorry, sir, we’re all a bit nervous, you see.”

“Right,” the officer said. “Watch yourself, son.” He stared at Louis. His look was decidedly unfriendly and scared me half to death. He was supposed to be our protector but I was not so sure in that moment.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Papa said.

“I’m sure, yes, it’s safe,” the policeman said. “At least for now, but you never know, that could change overnight.” As he left, he took one last glance at Louis and then at each of us, one by one. It was as if he was memorizing our faces in the candlelight. Slowly, we marched back upstairs into our apartment.

“That policeman was creepy,” Tinie said.

“He was just doing his job,” said Mama.

“And what job does he do now, exactly?” said Daniel. “It seems like you can’t be totally sure which side he’s really on.”

“He’s on his own side,” Papa said. “The side which protects him from the other.”

“How can a Dutch policeman side with the Nazis? That’s impossible.”

“Go back to sleep, Sal.”

“Your mother is right, and try not to dream too much.”

The bombing continued for several hours, so by the time I was supposed to get up and go to

school I was wide awake but thoroughly exhausted. My parents insisted that I stay home and, like any regular kid, I did not object, but I did not feel the normal relief of skipping a day of school. I did not want to leave our house and venture out into the streets. I was afraid of what I might see. I could not shake the image of those boots, those awful terrible big, black boots of the Nazi soldiers, marching through my city and up into my bedroom.

All day long, my family and I sat inside the apartment, pretending everything was normal when we knew it was not. We moved from room to room, peeking out of the windows, fearful of hearing the air raid sirens announcing another round of bombing, but no more came. Amsterdam, for the time being, had been spared more punishment.

“You see,” Mama said, “it’s not so bad today. Things are calm.”

“For now they are but how long will that last?”

“Who can say? Come, let’s eat dinner. Call your brothers and your sister.”

We ate once again without our father, who stayed close to the radio in his room, hoping to catch a piece of positive news he could bring into the kitchen, but none came.

I went to sleep that night with the sounds of the German Luftwaffe flying overhead. What were they doing? Hadn’t they bombed us enough already? I ran downstairs from my bedroom and found my parents sleeping. “Papa! Wake up! Don’t you hear the planes?”

“Come here and sit down,” my mother said.

“No, Mama, I want to know what’s going on, so tell me. Where are those planes going? Are they circling around to come after us here? Tell me, Papa!” I was so scared. Hearing myself ask these questions only intensified the feeling.

“I heard on the radio that they’re on their way to the port of Rotterdam. They’ll be bombing there all night if I know the Germans.”

“But that’s less than an hour’s drive from Amsterdam.”

“That’s true, Sal, but I don’t think they’ll come here tonight.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I can’t be sure. Honestly, I can’t, but I’ll bet they’re finished with their bombing here in Amsterdam. Otherwise, they would’ve continued the other night.”

“Go to sleep now, Sal. Nothing more will happen tonight. Try to sleep.”

Over the next 24 hours, Rotterdam was unmercifully bombed by the German air force, and all in all 20,000 buildings were destroyed, thousands of people injured, and nearly 1,000 people killed. Two days later, Gen. Henri Winkelman, commander-in-chief of the Netherlands air and sea forces, and the acting chief of the entire Dutch military, formally surrendered to the German army. My father told us as we sat in the kitchen, drinking tea with our cake.

On May 16, 1940, just six days after my Bar Mitzvah, Nazi troops marched into Amsterdam. My father’s long-held nightmare was finally coming true. The thunderous sound of boots pounding the cobblestones, which I had heard in my dreams a few nights before, was happening in real life right there in front of us.

Louis and Daniel and I slipped out of the apartment and made our way down the block to the corner. Hiding behind a few cars, we saw a large parade of soldiers and tanks moving along the main thoroughfare of our neighborhood. My heart was pounding a mile a minute in my chest. I couldn’t take my eyes off those big men, dressed perfectly alike and marching with a supreme confidence, as if our streets were meant for them and their shiny boots. I wanted to scream at them, but I was too scared to make a sound. Louis looked so angry I was afraid he would not be able to control himself. Daniel kept his hands over our mouths. After a few minutes, we crept back into our building, each of us shaking from what we had witnessed.

That morning I knew that life as I had known it up until then was effectively over for my entire family and me.

assemble in our house and celebrate a joyous occasion. Even my father, when he could tear himself away from the radio, was part of the festivities.

Adolf Hitler's army had invaded Poland just eight months earlier, and he had promised he would not invade the Netherlands. What did he want with us, anyway?—but just one month ago, Denmark and Norway had succumbed to the Germans. The governments of Belgium and England had warned our government that the Nazis would storm all three countries. Benito Mussolini and Hitler recently had formed an alliance, pitting the armies of Italy and Germany against those of France and Britain. All the grown-ups talked about was the impending war.

During the past two weeks, the Dutch government had proclaimed martial law throughout the country. Local police were arresting members of the Dutch Nazi party, and just days ago, 21 prominent Nazi sympathizers had been arrested and jailed.

Why was everyone so upset? The Nazis could not just march in and take over whenever they wanted. The Dutch would never stand for that. We were a peace-loving people.

We knew that Europe was falling apart, though. Even a kid my age could see that. My father found it increasingly difficult to enjoy family things like birthdays, especially mine, in my Bar Mitzvah year. I knew that he loved me, and all of us, but he hated the escalating war that seem-

ed to be growing closer and closer to home.

We were barely finished eating my birthday cake when he burst into the room, paler than I had ever seen him, staring at us like we were strangers on the street and not his beloved family.

"What is it, Papa?"

"The Norwegian government has escaped from Oslo and taken exile in London. I just heard it on the radio."

Suddenly the party was over, and our guests left. Which country would be next to fall to the Germans? . . .

"Sal, come here, please." My mother was calling me from the kitchen. "I need your help."

"Mama, I'm studying." I was in the sitting room, working hard.

"Sal! There's so much to do, with your Bar Mitzvah tomorrow."

"Exactly! I have a lot to study so I do it correctly."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll do fine. Listen to me. Louis is busy playing football; Daniel and Tinie are at work; and your father, God bless him, can't pull himself away from the radio."

"Mama!" I protested, but no luck.

"I want you to go across the street to the Kluiverts and ask Frank's mother if I can borrow her good lace tablecloth."

"Now? You need to know that right now?"

"What? You should go Saturday morning before we go to the synagogue?" She was trying to tease me.

"Sal, do it now, please."

"But why can't Papa go? He loves talking with Mr. Kluivert about all this war stuff. They can go on and on for hours. Come on, Mama. Let Papa go. He'll be happy to ask instead of me."

Just then, my father walked into the kitchen, stiffly, looking like a ghost. His face was frozen and gray, like he was hypnotized. He stopped in the doorway as if someone else was controlling his legs. He did not say a word. He did not even look like a human being who could speak. He stared straight ahead at my mother, turned like a robot, and stared at me.

"Philip!" Mama was shocked at my father's appearance. "Oh my God, what is it?" My father did not move. "What's wrong?" My father said nothing and gazed blankly across the room. "Philip, my darling, what is it?"

"Papa, say something!" I stepped across the kitchen floor to him. "Papa! You're scaring Mama, and me, too." He nodded his head back and forth. I once saw a man have a seizure in the marketplace and he did the same thing, rocking back and forth before he started to shake violently and collapsed to the ground. I was afraid the same thing could be happening to my father right there in our kitchen. I hoped he still knew me, standing there before him. I took his hand. He looked down at me, swallowed hard, and lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "It's over."

Afraid . . . Always Afraid

I stood in the street for a long time. When it began to get dark, signaling that our curfew soon would be in effect, I began to walk. I eventually found myself on the doorstep of my cousin's house. I could not remember how I got there, but hoped I had found a safe place to rest before figuring out what to do next. My cousin was Jewish, but she was married to Bram, a Christian, so I had no idea if either of them were still in Amsterdam. Even though we had not had any contact for quite some time, I hoped at least one of them would be there to help me. I did not know where else to go.

There were no lights on inside the house. I thought it might be abandoned, that Bram and my cousin had been taken away in the police raids. I took a chance and rang the doorbell. I waited for a response. As I feared, nothing happened. Just as I was about to walk away, I heard a small noise inside the house. Luckily, for the time being at least, Bram had hidden himself well. As he pulled me inside, his eyes darted up and down the street, surveying the area for potential trouble. Anyone found on the street after curfew could be arrested or shot on the spot. I was so shocked when Bram grabbed me, I almost fainted. He put a finger over my mouth, motioning for me not to talk, although in that moment I was sure I had forgotten how.

Once inside, I felt safe. I had been completely terrified alone on the darkening streets,

but being with Bram made me feel better right away. He explained that my cousin had been taken away by the German police, and that he did not feel safe, even though he was not Jewish. In those circumstances, he did not feel safe at all.

"Bram, they took my mama and my aunt."

I could not help myself. I had to tell someone.

"They just came without warning. I took off my shoes and my cello is broken and they shot a mouse and my mama is, I don't know where she is, and I don't know what to do."

Bram stopped me and grabbed my shoulders.

"It's okay, Sal. You're safe here." I could finally breathe, at least for the moment.

Bram was impressive—blond, tall, and broad-shouldered—an athletic, powerful man. He always had been kind to my family, and he made me feel welcome.

"Sit down. I'll get you something to eat. You must be hungry."

As he went into his kitchen, I realized I had not eaten anything for hours, and I was famished. Bram soon returned with a plate of food. As I began to devour the bread and cheese, he sat down and leaned in closely. "Sal, listen carefully now. I am a member of the Dutch resistance." I looked up at him in amazement. "You must promise, right here and now, that you never heard me tell you a thing."

"Oh God, I promise, Bram. Really, I do, I

won't tell anybody, I swear it." I was stammering. "I'll do anything to stay here. Please."

"Okay, okay, don't worry, I trust you. I figure you've grown up a lot already from all you've been through." I nodded. I had seen more in the past few years than kids living in a country without invaders. In fact, I had seen more in the past few hours than I ever cared to see in my entire lifetime.

"Bram, tell me more."

"We're all Dutch citizens," he said. "Young, old, rich, poor, it doesn't matter. Jewish and Christian—we share a common dream of getting rid of these German occupiers."

"That's what Daniel said before he disappeared."

Bram was not paying attention to me in that moment. He jumped up and ran to the window, thinking he had heard something. I froze again in fear, unsure what to do.

"It's okay. It's nothing."

"Is it true the resistance is attacking German soldiers?"

"We've been conducting raids on German soldiers, supply depots, and transportation centers, doing whatever we can to upset their operations."

"Were you ever on a raid? I swear I won't say a word."

"I was one of the people who tried to set the Amsterdam Town Hall on fire. One night, we took a small boat full of explosives up the canal.

"Philip, what are you saying? What's over? What do you mean?"

"It's over. They've crossed the river."

"What are you talking about?"

"They've crossed the river and there's no turning back." Mama looked down, as if she knew the answer. My father did not speak.

"Mama, who crossed the river? What river?"

"Philip, tell him."

My father took a long, slow breath, as if he was trying to breathe life back into himself after it had been taken away. He stood unsteadily, holding on to the table, like his legs might give way any second. "Hitler." He looked so pained saying that name out loud in front of us, as if he were violating our home by uttering that sound from his lips.

"Adolf Hitler sent the German army across the Dutch border at the Waal River at 5:30 this morning and they are now marching toward Amsterdam."

"Oh my God!" My mother looked shocked, like I had never see her. "They're 40 miles away! What can we do?"

All I could think of was Louis and I, riding our bikes last year all the way to Eindhoven, 40 miles away. We were kids. If we could ride that far in one day, what could the German army do, marching with tanks?

"What can we do? I don't know, Rachel. I don't know. I don't know anything right now."

"We just have to wait and see, right Papa?"

I hoped my question sounded normal, be-

cause in that moment I felt desperate to make the German invasion seem like a problem we could fix, if only we put our minds to it.

"Yes, Sal. We can only wait and see what will happen." My father turned and left the kitchen without saying another word. It was as if a judge had appeared out of nowhere in our house and ordered my father to be sent away to prison, or worse, to be put to death, and no words could change the verdict. My mother and I looked at each other, unsure what to do. We both realized that my father would be sequestered in the bedroom, keeping his ears glued to the radio, and that if anything new should develop, we would be the first to hear about it.

"All right, then, Sal, I want you to go now and ask Mrs. Kluivert about her tablecloth." She was doing her best to put everything back to normal.

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, I am absolutely not doing anything of the sort. Hitler is 40 miles away, and while that may seem to be very close, meanwhile, life goes on here at home, and boys will have their Bar Mitzvahs, and tablecloths need to be borrowed, so just go across the street and take care of this like I asked you!"

I slipped on my shoes and left the apartment. Going downstairs, I could not get the picture of my father's ashen face out of my mind. Who even said the German army wants to come all the way to Amsterdam? Maybe

they will just stay in the south and relax by the river—but then again, maybe they won't.

As I stepped onto the sidewalk, I imagined what it would be like if German tanks were rolling down the street. The thought made me shudder and hurry to see Frank. Surely his mother, who was a great cook, would have something sweet baking in the kitchen, and we could all have a good snack and think of better things, like tablecloths and Bar Mitzvahs.

However, the mood inside the Kluivert's home was not any better. They had heard the news on the radio, too, like most everybody in the city. Frank and his mother were quietly talking when I knocked on their door. I arranged to borrow the tablecloth, thanked Mrs. Kluivert, and returned home without so much as a single sweet. Things had to be pretty bad if Mrs. Kluivert was not handing out her famous cookies.

After a year of dreading the inevitable but mostly never imagining that such a bad dream could come true, it finally had happened. On Friday, May 10, 1940, Germany had invaded our country, just one day before my Bar Mitzvah. ★

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We rowed quietly so no one could hear us. The plan was to sneak inside the building after the police did their normal security check."

I sat enthralled by my cousin's story.

"We wanted to destroy all the files with the names and addresses of Amsterdam's Jews. We figured that if we could make these lists disappear, the Germans wouldn't be able to round anyone up for arrest and deportation."

"Exactly! What a fantastic idea."

"Yeah, you're right. We got ourselves into the building, got the fire started, and got out in time before anyone could catch us."

"What happened?"

"The fire was put out before it could spread, and all the records were saved."

"But you tried."

"Yeah, and we'll try again. That's why I'm in danger, Sal. There are basically two reasons I'm a wanted man here in Amsterdam. First, I'm married to a Jew, and second, I'm a suspected Nazi resister. It's becoming more and more dangerous for me to be seen in public, and if they find out I'm still living in this house, they will come and arrest me."

"Can't you stay with a neighbor?"

"Unfortunately I can't be sure about them. The Germans are paying Dutch citizens 30 guilders if they turn in a Jew in hiding or a suspected resistance fighter. They use the money from the Jewish bank accounts they've frozen."

"They took my father's money," I said. "All of it."

"It's not only Nazi sympathizers who do this. When ordinary people struggle to get food and

basic supplies, they grow desperate, and sometimes that means turning in their neighbors to the Nazis, but that's enough for now. Go to sleep, Sal. You must be tired."

"Bram, I have to ask you something. Is Daniel part of the resistance?"

"I don't know. Really, I don't know one way or the other. Most of us operate in great secrecy. It's better if none of us knows too much. That way, if the Nazis catch someone, they won't be able to divulge too much valuable information."

"So, you don't know anything about Daniel?"

"Sorry, I don't. Listen, I'm sure one day you'll get to ask Daniel yourself."

"Yeah, hopefully. . ."

Over the next few days, I hoped that some other resistance fighters would show up and bring a report about Daniel blowing up a German tank on some canal bridge, but those were just the dreams of a lonely little brother.

That night was the first time I had ever slept anywhere alone, without my family, or at least without Louis that one time we slept overnight in Eindhoven. Luckily, I was so tired I had no trouble falling asleep on Bram's couch. I woke up abruptly when I heard what sounded like a convoy of trucks. Bram rushed in and told me not to move. He went to the window and peered through a tiny slit he had cut in the shade.

Whatever danger might have been looming passed as soon as it came. Still, from then on, whenever Bram sensed peril—sirens in the streets, soldiers marching, or spontaneous shouting from his neighbors—he made me hide

under the wooden floor of his kitchen. It was terribly cramped and stuffy in there but I understood that it might be the difference between life and death, between seeing my family again or not, so I did not complain and remained hidden under the flooring for as long as Bram thought necessary.

Several days later, he came back home with disturbing news. "Sal, it's too risky for you to stay here, so I'm moving you to another house."

"Are you sure?" I was terribly disappointed.

"Sorry, but it has to be done. It's not far away and you'll be safe. I'll check on you as soon as I can."

That evening, just before curfew, Bram ushered me across the canal to a house on the Prinsengracht, just a few doors down from where Anne Frank and her family eventually would be discovered by the Nazi police. For three weeks, I lived in a small apartment with Bram's cousin and her son. All day long, I stayed home alone with the young boy, while Bram's cousin went off with the resistance. Whenever a German patrol passed by the house, we had to hide away from the windows, careful not to make even one peep the soldiers might overhear.

Keeping a little boy amused while fighting boredom and the fear of arrest was nerve-racking. Dutch police headquarters was just across the canal. They could search us anytime, and I never knew when a neighbor might see me inside the house and report it.

The noose was tightening around the necks of Amsterdam's Jews.