

Chapter 1: The View from the Window

I shivered; my forehead pressed to the front window of our row house over the butcher's shop on the Weimerstraat in Den Haag. A single leaf floated through the misty morning air. Just around the corner, patrolling the Franklinstraat, two German soldiers with rifles slung over their shoulders paced the red-bricked street up and down, up and down. No other people were within view.

“*Mamma, kom snel* [Mamma, come quickly],” I called. “*Wat is er buiten aan de hand* [What's going on outside]?”

Mamma sat motionless with unfocused eyes and tightly folded hands.

“Get away from that window, Meta!” my father barked from across the room.

I took a quick step back.

My mother rose from her chair and pulled me away from the window. She picked me up, straining me tightly to her chest.

Then no one spoke.

I tried to peek outside over Mamma's shoulder, but the net curtains obscured my view.

My father went to the window, watched for a few minutes, turned and silently beckoned Mamma, who deposited me into her chair and joined him.

After giving me a warning frown, my teenaged sister Corrie went to stand next to Mamma.

There they stood, all peering through the tiny crack between the net curtains, being very careful to remain concealed. I noticed they were no longer watching me.

Quickly, I took my chance, moving towards the side of the window. My other sister Sieglinde followed, whispering, “Meta, we're not allowed. We're too young!”

I ignored her. Pushing the heavy top curtain aside, I slipped behind it and looked out. Sieglinde took her usual place behind me, holding onto my dress and timidly peeking over my shoulder.

The Nazi soldiers continued their marching; their shiny black jackboots snapped an ominous rhythm audible through the drafty window. As the mantel clock chimed 12, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

Just then, I spotted a man coming down the Franklinstraat towards our street, pedaling his wooden-wheeled bicycle so furiously that his legs were a blur. Where could he be going all alone and in such a hurry?

Momentarily distracted by my racing thoughts, the ear-piercing report of machine gun fire made me jump. Sieglinde gasped. The man fell to the ground; his bicycle slid away from under him. He lay flat on his back in the middle of an ever-growing circle of blood. My stomach clenched and cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

“Swine!” Pappa hissed through his teeth.

Mamma murmured, “They were waiting for him,” as she twisted her apron between her fingers.

I turned back to the window, my eyes drawn as if by magnets, and my breaths almost deafening in the silence.

The soldiers slowly backed away while watching the man cautiously.

“*Lafaards* [cowards]! Afraid of a dead man!” my father spat with his fists so tightly clenched that his knuckles were white.

One of the soldiers pointed his machine gun from a distance and emptied it into the man’s chest. After waiting for quite some time, both soldiers approached and turned the dead body over with their feet. The second soldier, his jackboots now covered in blood, fired his entire magazine of bullets into the man’s back.

The soldiers backed away and waited again, all the while scrutinizing their handiwork. I wondered why. Were they genuinely expecting there to be any life left?

After what seemed like an eternity, they once again approached the mangled corpse. Each soldier grasped one of the man’s feet, and they dragged him over the street and up onto the sidewalk, leaving a trail of blood in his wake. His arms flopped over his head, and his face bounced on the pavement as they went. The soldiers slung the body into the ice cream parlor on the corner as if he were no more than a piece of trash. They picked up his broken bicycle and threw it onto the sidewalk. There it remained, a forlorn testament to that day’s activities.

I let out a whimper. Sieglinde clutched my hand and trembled while silent tears made rivers down her cheeks.

Mamma came over, knelt in front of us, and gently wiped our wet cheeks. Picking me up and, holding my sister’s hand, she took us back to her chair, well away from the offending

window. I sat myself on my mother's cozy lap while Sieglinde perched on the arm of the chair. Mamma silently enclosed us with her shaking arms. Corrie stood with her head pillowed on Pappa's shoulder, trying valiantly—but unsuccessfully—to gulp back her sobs. There were no words of comfort; there could be none.

I witnessed my first murder at just six years old. Now, 80 years later, the memory still makes me cry. World War II changed my life.