

Remembering the horror of war

'We knew we would be free someday'

By Francie Healy

There's much, so much, to tell about war. You remember it as though it were yesterday, and you were riding your bicycle to school, and the airplanes came, and everyone was afraid.

Jane Breedyk settles into a chair in her comfortable Delta home, picks up her needlework, and speaks quietly.

Her face is soft, eyes bright, and for awhile she is 16 again, living in Holland during one of the most terrifying times of her life.

It was the end of the school year, only a month to go. War was in the air but it was only talk. Then one day Jane was pedalling to class and she heard the noise. Over in the field there were soldiers parachuting out of planes.

"I just kept riding my bike as fast as I could to school," she says, "but they sent us all home. It was war."

Five days later the country was in German hands. "Dutch soldiers came to our house," she recalls. "They shouted: 'Go to the basement! Hide!' We didn't know what was going on."

Nearby, an aunt and a cousin were shot in their own home. The aunt died. Jane and the other six children in her family stayed indoors, and prayed, and shook.

"Sometimes the worst of it," adds Jane's husband, Peter, "was the mental pressure. The newspapers were full of lies. We tried to listen to the BBC, but it was badly distorted. We picked up a little, we shared news with neighbours, we got a small idea of what was happening."

Peter lived near the same village, Bodegraven, as Jane, and they both remember with tenderness their early courtship. Peter befriended Jane's brothers, but it was really the dark-haired beauty he



Jane and Peter Breedyk of Delta were in Holland when the bombs fell during World War II. Jane was 16, Peter was 24, and their worlds were turned upside down.

Mirror photo by Francie Healy

wanted to get to know. Jane's parents "didn't catch on for awhile", but they must have been pleased with this strapping young suitor, an accomplished mechanic.

There's a picture of Peter in his early 20s. Big, blond, hearty, and handsome. The photograph speaks of confidence, glows with the light of future plans.

Another picture, taken two years later, shows a different image. Peter is emaciated, bone-thin, with dark circles under his eyes.

"We were starving," he says. "People died from hunger. You couldn't buy food, money was worthless, and there were only food coupons. The Nazis took the food, and the best rooms, everything. You can't imagine how hungry we were."

Farmers had whatever food they could smuggle to their own tables before handing it over to the enemy, and Peter was able to grab a square meal once a week at home or at Jane's.

In 1943 he became a farm inspector. He had to travel around the countryside on his bicycle and board in farmers' homes.

"But no one wanted me," he said. "They took one look at me and knew I'd eat more than they could afford."

Finally he went to stay at an old people's home. He paid for his room and board with potatoes.

The ways of war are strange and disorienting, and turn ordinary lives upside down. Peter's father was sick and becoming weaker every month. But there were no telephones and the only communication was more or less weekly through the postman, who travelled by motorcycle.

One Saturday Peter left the place where he was staying to pay a visit to Jane back home in Bodegraven, at the office where she worked.

Her fellow employees told him, sorry, but Jane had gone to his (Peter's) father's funeral. By the time Peter got there, it was over.

"This is war for you," he says, the deep sorrow still in his voice.

There was more sadness. One of Peter's brothers became a political prisoner and was killed. A Jewish family in the village, a lovely couple with 10 children, disappeared in the night.

"And not one came back. There's a plaque now where they used to live." Cities and towns would light up hideously "and the whole place would be full of Germans."

Friends and relatives died. Houses were blown to bits, with families inside. Jane watched this once. She also watched a plane that was shot down. It spiralled into a lake and disappeared.

Spies were everywhere, "and you could never speak out on the street, on a bus, a train...they'd

follow you, put you in jail, shoot you.”

A park in The Hague, hit with a torrent of bombs, falling on evening strollers. Germans breaking into houses at all hours of the day and night, demanding to know where people were hiding. Buildings split apart, beds hanging out of windows.

And the trains, taking people to German factories. Some really were factories. Some were not. And the young Dutch men, ordered to grab nothing more than a blanket and join the Germany army at once. Young men who hid, escaped, were shot.

But there was also magnificent bravery. Jane’s brother, who belonged to the Resistance, risked his life several times to help two Italians escape in a small rowboat. After the war, he received word from the Italians. They made it. They were home and they were safe. Jane says her brother still cherishes the letter.

The wonderful people of Amsterdam, who had admiration for their well-respected Jewish citizens, showed their courage. When the Nazis closed down businesses and ordered Jews to wear yellow stars, the whole city went on strike. Non-Jewish doctors and lawyers and bus drivers and shopkeepers were shot for their refusal to work.

The city shut down until so many people had been killed or sent to concentration camps there was no choice but to go on, in despair and anger, as they were ordered.

“We are so proud they did this,” Peter says, his eyes glistening a little. “It was nuts. The Germans would say: ‘Why do you do this for stupid Jews?’ They couldn’t understand why the Dutch would take these chances. But the people of Amsterdam did it. They did it just the same.”

Even in war, there was a whisper of hope. There were the Germans who were ordinary folk, who were, or could have been, friends.

Peter remembers the time he had to flee because he had uncovered a Nazi’s involvement in the black market. When the Nazi left the country, a German administrator got word to Peter to come home because it was safe.

“I don’t think he would have sent anyone to a concentration camp,” Peter says. “All the Germans weren’t bad. They were decent people and when you had the chance to talk to them, behind closed doors, you could speak freely about things of the heart.”

He adds both Germans and Dutch “took their lives in their hands” when they did this, and had to take care never to be seen speaking in public.

There were glimmers of joy and humour. When Peter and Jane were married, they received valuable gifts: a loaf of coveted white bread, a slice of cheese, a quart of milk, a pound of butter. The next day the wedding guests arrived by bicycle “and ate up every darn thing”, Jane laughs, “but we had a lovely meal.”

One day, when the newlyweds were sitting out on their little back porch, they spotted Red Cross airplanes from Sweden throwing food out on the ground.

“We jumped up and ran into the apartment,” Jane recalls. “We said, ‘The war is over!’ We tore the black paper from the windows, and that night we lit a candle.

“All of a sudden we heard a German soldier shouting up at us from the street: *Licht aus! Licht aus!* We were so scared we blew out the candle and sat there, shaking.”

But war really was over, and the next day shines like the dawn in Jane’s and Peter’s memories.

“People were cheering and running out of their houses. Everyone shouted: ‘The Canadians are here!’ We worked hard to remember our English so we could talk to them, but the first ones we met were French Canadians from Quebec.”

She remembers the endless lines of moving soldiers: the Germans left on one side of the Rhine; Canadians arrived on the other.

“The Canadians made a bad turn with their tanks and ripped up our beautiful cobblestones,” Peter says, “but we were so happy, we said, ‘Oh, it’s just the Canadians, it’s all right’.”

Funny how little things stay in your mind. Canadian soldiers set up camps in the woods and cooked themselves breakfasts of bacon and eggs.

“To this day,” Jane says, “when I make this meal, I love the sweet smell, and I remember.”

Peter and Jane arrived in Canada with four of their five children in the 1950s and eventually settled in Delta. But once in awhile you catch a glimpse between them, a look of knowing that goes deep into the past.

“If Hitler had won the war, the whole world would have been in trouble,” Peter says.

And Jane adds, “But we knew we’d be free some day.”