

“WITH ONLY A TOOTHBRUSH”

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The following personal narrative was written by Jacky Erwteman.

“WITH ONLY A TOOTHBRUSH”

It's hard to know where to begin. Over the last few years friends have told me 'you must write it down'. Yes, I thought, I must. But where to begin and already the tears are forming.

My family are Dutch, and I was born immediately after the war in London where my parents had taken refuge from the German invasion of Holland. This is the story of how they, my Papa's mother, one of his sisters and her husband escaped, and survived.

Maybe I should start with a very small family tree. My Papa, Jef, was born in Amsterdam in 1906. My Mama, Elly, was born in Rotterdam in 1912 and married Papa in 1935. Papa had two sisters: Annie, born in 1909, and Kitty, born in 1912. Annie married Jaap and at the time war broke out they had two sons, Arnold, aged 4, and Jack, aged 2. Kitty married Simon (Siem) just months before Holland was invaded and to this day her passport is still in her maiden name with the added words 'wife of Simon Aldewereld'.

My paternal Grandpapa had always instilled in his children that the Dutch Royal family were good for the Jews, and that if Queen Wilhelmina and the Royal family ever had to leave Holland, they should too. And that is exactly what happened. Before Holland was invaded, that unforgettable date of 10 May 1940, the Dutch held a number of theories about what they would do if the Germans came. They all knew that Holland would fight back and some held the view that they would breach the dams and flood the country. Germany and Britain were already at war and every night my parents, now living in the Jeker Straat in Amsterdam, and my paternal Grandmama, Kitty and Siem, living in the Clio Straat in Amsterdam, heard the British and German planes flying over head. Oom [Uncle] Siem said that he could tell the difference. They never realised that Holland was in such danger of invasion.

On Friday 10 May 1940, they awoke to a lot of noise. Schiphol, Amsterdam's airport, was being bombed and on the radio - Papa always tuned into the BBC - they heard that Germany had invaded. My Grandmama, Annie, Jaap and the two boys were staying the weekend with Tante [Aunt] Kitty and Oom Siem. Mama and Papa came round for dinner that evening and although they did not know it, that was the last time they were all together. Papa and Tante Kitty worked together in the family diamond business. Every Friday evening all the goods were locked away in a time safe which could not be opened until the next working day. As Monday 13 May was Whitsun and a Bank holiday, the next working day was Tuesday. But on Tuesday 14 May they awoke to the news that Queen Wilhelmina had left for England. The two parts of the family, my parents in the Clio Straat and the rest in the Jeker Straat, could not contact each other - the telephone wasn't working. Quite independently they took the decision to leave. Tante Kitty went to the Beethoven Straat to get a taxi to take her, her husband and her mother to Ijmuiden. Jaap had his own car and the taxi driver told him that if Jaap would follow him, Jaap stood a good chance of getting through. But Jaap wanted to tell his parents what he was doing, and with his

wife and children set off for another part of the city. Whilst Jaap and the taxi driver were talking, Arnold came into the taxi, sat on Tante Kitty's lap and said 'I want to go with you'. Tante Kitty said that he had to stay with his parents and brother. She never saw him again. Arnold, Jack and their mother were killed in Auschwitz on 6 October 1944. Tante Kitty, now 92, still talks about that moment with Arnold in the taxi which has haunted her for 64 years. And I, selfishly, think about the cousins I never knew and wonder constantly what my life would have been like with family of my own generation.

And my parents? Well, on hearing that the Queen had left, they jumped on to their bicycles and started to cycle to IJmuiden. They avoided the road blocks by going off road and after a while were overtaken by a taxi with Grandmama, Tante Kitty and Oom Siem. Oom Siem's friendship with one soldier on a road block and the taxi driver's knowledge had got them through. The taxi driver took my parents' bicycles and asked if he could have them if my parents did not come back for them the next day. My parents agreed, and the bikes were left with a farmer. And so the five of them reached IJmuiden.

The port was full of people and hundreds of little boats, all being bombed by the Germans. My parents got separated from the other three. Grandmama was very tired and with Tante Kitty and Oom Siem went to lie in the sand dunes. A man in uniform came up to them and challenged them in English 'What are you doing here?' Tante Kitty replied 'What are you doing here – what nationality are you?' 'We're British' came the reply which got the retort from my Aunt of 'Well, where were you yesterday?' 'We're here now' he said and left. These Dutch!

At 6 pm they heard that Holland had surrendered and the Dutch Government had ordered all the boats in the harbour to leave for England with as many people as possible. My Aunt, Uncle and Grandmama were together on one boat. Mama found herself on a boat without Papa and looking at the quay saw him still on shore. She jumped out of the boat, was caught by a soldier, and reunited with Papa they managed to get onto another boat, apparently one of the last boats that was able to leave IJmuiden. All five, albeit in two groups, were in Norwegian iron ore cargo boats. They had to stay in the hold because of the constant machine gunning from the German planes overhead and consequently ended up completely red from the ore dust. Grandmama was very ill and Tante Kitty took her out on deck where she collapsed. A doctor diagnosed sea-sickness. And here I should digress to explain that Grandmama was English but had never returned to England because she was always so ill at sea. However, no-one in the family knew that until that day in a Norwegian iron ore cargo boat fleeing for their lives.

The next morning found many, many boats of different sizes and nationalities in the English Channel and Poole Harbour. It was an amazing sight after a dark and dangerous night. They were landed at Brownsea Island and their passports were taken from them. The men and women were separated and in the women's tent Mama, Grandmama and Tante Kitty were reunited, as were Papa and Oom Siem in the men's. The first thing Mama and Tante Kitty did, and this was completely typical of them, was to wash their clothes. They only had the clothes they were wearing – each wore a suit (skirt, of course), a blouse, stockings, shoes and a raincoat. Aside from their passports and a little money, that was the sum total of their possessions, except for a toothbrush each had hastily stuck into the pocket of their jacket. When the passports, which I still have, were returned, my parents passports had been stamped with an oval purple stamp 'Immigration Officer Poole 16 May 1940'; but not my Grandmama's passport presumably because they had seen from her Dutch passport that she had been born in London on 2 February 1881. Consequently she was allowed out of the camp and was also allowed to take her two children, and their spouses. Meanwhile, in the men's tent, the Dutch intelligence officer working with British intelligence was looking at the names of those that had just arrived and spotted Papa's. The intelligence officer said that his bridge partner in Amsterdam was a Jef Erwtman and he wanted to see

if this man in the men's tent on Brownsea Island was the same person. It was, and so he was able to vouch for the fact that my father was not a spy.

But where to go with no money? Grandmama contacted her family and one of her relations had a flat in Hove that they could use. So far as the weather was concerned it was one of the most beautiful summers. Mama and Tante Kitty went to the beach and Papa went fishing. Everyday he came home with 'dinner' usually fish but sometimes he had been able to trade his catch for some meat. After a week, the seemingly idyllic life began to bore, and they asked if they could go to London. They were individually and very thoroughly interviewed by a man from Scotland Yard who asked them why they had left Holland, why they had come to England and asked them to say 'Scheveningen' the name of a coastal town that only the Dutch can properly pronounce! They were given permission to go to London and their passports stamped by the Alien Registration Office in Hove on 23 May 1940.

In London, they were offered a house by my Grandmama's second cousin, Claudine. Claudine lived in North London but wanted to take her children out of London because of the bombing but her house insurance would be invalid if no-one was living in it. So my five, as I have come to call them over the years, moved in. Tante Kitty recalls an argument over the bedrooms which, she says, because she and Oom Siem were the youngest, they lost. Strange that my parents never told me that bit! After a while, Tante Kitty got a call from someone who had been a close friend of hers in Amsterdam. In fact, she had introduced him to his future wife, also one of her friends. He had started up a paper called 'Vrij Nederland' [Free Holland] and asked Tante Kitty to come and work for him, which she did. Tante Kitty, I should add here, was a very good secretary with exceptionally fast shorthand and typing in four languages. But, the youngest member of the family getting a job, whilst husband and elder brother still had none and were left at home with the domestic chores, was not popular and eventually she was made to give up her job. Mama then got a job, she was also a trained secretary, working for Claudine's husband, a doctor in Harley Street. One day, walking in Oxford Street, Tante Kitty telephoned Mama when an air-raid warning started. Mama told my Aunt to get down into the underground immediately where she and everyone else were pushed onto a train. Tante Kitty ended up at the end of the line with no idea of where she was and without a ticket. That didn't matter; a kind and helpful official told her how to get back home and said that a ticket would not be necessary. How times have changed!

Before the war both Papa and Oom Siem had been called up for military service. Oom Siem had been rejected because of his poor eyesight and after a year Papa had been discharged because of a problem with his leg. But now, in London, they were again called up for military service and again it was realised that they were not sufficiently fit for active duty. However, they were still required to work for the Dutch Government. Papa had been trying to make contacts with the Diamond Bourse when he was told by the Dutch Government to assist the British by working in the armaments factory, showing how to use industrial diamonds for making tools and weapons. Oom Siem had been working at the Rotterdamse Bank in Amsterdam. His then manager was now in London working for the Dutch Government, knew that Oom Siem was also now in London and recalled that Oom Siem was an economist. The Shipping and Trading Department of the Dutch Government in exile needed someone to go to Curacao to handle the financial situation there and they chose Oom Siem. He was allowed to take his wife – not that she wanted to go. Tante Kitty was devastated: she loved England; the Battle of Britain was raging; there was a certain spirit; she felt part of the war; and she belonged here with her mother and brother. But Oom Siem had no choice and neither had she. So Tante Kitty, who had in the space of six months married, fled her home and her country leaving her sister, nephews and friends behind, was now having to leave her mother and her brother not knowing whether she would ever see any of them again. Suddenly, her husband of only 11 months was all she had – but at least she still had him.

September 1940 found my Aunt and Uncle on the train to Liverpool with my Aunt crying all the way. Liverpool was under constant German bombardment. The next day they boarded a ship, part of a convoy that zigzagged its way for three weeks until it reached New York. The sister ship to the one that my Aunt and Uncle were on was torpedoed above the water line and fortunately no lives were lost. They arrived in New York, still without money and still in the clothes they were wearing when they had left Holland but now my Aunt was the proud owner of a cotton dress that she had bought at C&A's in Hove. They had heard that in America you could buy something and then take it back the next day and get your money back. This had left a deep impression on my Aunt and the day after arriving in New York she went to Macy's and bought something. She cannot now remember what. My Uncle was horrified by the purchase but my Aunt explained that she had bought it only so that she could return it the next day and get her money back – which is precisely what she did! One evening, out for a walk, they heard the sirens of a New York ambulance. My Aunt reacted as though it were an air raid warning and pulled my Uncle into a store.

In October, they were embarked on a luxury cruise ship to Curacao, via Miami and Bermuda where they had a whole day's sight seeing. When they arrived in Curacao, the immigration officer asked my Aunt whether she could prove that she was married to Simon Aldewereld. Fortunately, along with her passport she had taken her 'trouwboek', the marriage book which gives details of the bride's parents, the groom and his parents and a family tree. It was this official that wrote in her passport, in Dutch, 'wife of Simon Aldewereld'. Today, officials seeing that find it unusual and as the war becomes more distant, it becomes even more so.

At the outbreak of the war many large companies transferred their registered offices to Curacao and Oom Siem, as an official for the Dutch Government, was responsible for monitoring the financial regulations of these companies under the Head of Finance for Curacao. Meanwhile, my Aunt, who was not allowed to work because she was married, was not coping with the intense heat of the island. Eventually she went to a doctor who told her that she needed a thyroid operation which she categorically refused to have there. The day after war was declared between America and Japan, the Americans arrived on the island. At about the same time, the Commissie voor Rechts Verkeer, an organisation responsible for looking after the property of Germans on the island, was looking for a secretary. The Chief Executive of the Commission wanted my Aunt to come and work for him but one member of the Board of the Commission thoroughly disapproved of a married woman working. When they still couldn't find anyone else suitably qualified - my Aunt's language and secretarial skills were exceptional in Amsterdam and London, let alone Curacao - the Chief Executive obtained permission to give my Aunt a trial. Throughout her time there, the one Board member who had objected to her employment ignored her even though he had to pass her desk every time he came into the office. Any married woman who worked had to be simply dreadful and best avoided!

Mr Janssen, one of Oom Siem's bosses, was transferred to New York. He sent the Governor of Curacao a telegram saying that he had to have Mr Aldewereld in New York for a few months to help out with the work. Oom Siem told the Governor that he would have to take his wife with him but the Governor refused: no-one was allowed to leave the island because of the war. My Uncle was working for the Dutch Government, represented in Curacao by the Governor, and he had to do as he was told. Tante Kitty went to the doctor and told him that her husband was being sent to New York for three months and if she went also she could have her thyroid operation there. The doctor then wrote to the Governor saying that since Simon Aldewereld had to go to New York for three months, he recommended that his

wife accompanied him so that she could have her operation there, suggesting that the procedure could not be performed on the island. The Governor agreed and my Aunt and Uncle left for New York.

My Aunt had never been in an aeroplane before, so the flight from Curacao to Miami via Jamaica and Cuba was an adventure. She recalls arriving in Jamaica where laid out on tables was a sea of flowers and fruit, which they hadn't seen for eighteen months. They then went by sea plane to Cuba and Miami, and then by train to New York where they arrived on 31 March 1942. On the way, the train stopped in Washington DC which was covered in deep snow. There was no snow in New York and it took a long time before my Aunt was convinced that New York was really located north of Washington.

So here they were in New York, in a very cold Spring having come from a hot and humid climate and once again in the same suits that they were wearing when they had left Holland. The next day they were both ill – for two weeks. As soon as they felt well enough, they took a cab to 5th Avenue and bought clothes with money borrowed from the Dutch Government. My Aunt recalls buying a girdle, stockings, a suit, a coat and a pair of shoes, which were agony after eighteen months in sandals! When my Uncle told me this story, the only thing they had bought was an overcoat each! My Uncle thought that it was awful that he had had to borrow money with the consequence that he had paid back the loan within four months. They still had nothing else, but they were not in debt.

Mr Janssen never returned to Curacao, so neither did my Uncle. Because he was now in America, my Uncle was again called up and rejected for military service. He continued to work for the Dutch Government, this time in the Netherlands Purchasing Commission. Then the Government set up an office called the Board for the Netherlands Indies Surinam and Curacao. Mr Janssen asked my Uncle if Tante Kitty would work for the President of the Board. My Aunt had reported for work before they had finished asking her!

One day in July 1944, the then President of the Board, Daniel Crena de longh, went to a meeting at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire. This was the now historically famous meeting of the representatives of 44 of the United Nations and the countries associated with them in the war. Although it would be another year before the war would be over, the representatives met to put the capstone on some three years of preliminary work. The meeting at Bretton Woods talked about creating a framework for future international co-operation and to do that they created two institutions: the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, commonly known as the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. When Mr Crena de longh returned to New York he told my Aunt about the plans to create the World Bank. Tante Kitty told my Uncle who thought that it sounded very interesting.

In New York, they lived in a succession of hotels because in those days, hotels only took guests for a maximum of five days. They then met someone whose father owned a hotel on 72nd Street, West side, and he let them have a room for as long as they needed it. A few months before the end of the war, they realised that they would have to decide what to do when the Government returned to Holland. Oom Siem wanted to stay in America. He didn't want to go back to Holland because by this time he knew that all his family had been killed. And my Aunt had by then learnt the fate of her sister and nephews. The Board had an office on Rockefeller Plaza and downstairs, above the café, there was a room where, after the Bevrijding [the liberation of Holland], were books listing the names of the Dutch that had been released from the camps. Everyday in her lunch break, my Aunt studied the lists of names in the books but Annie's name was not there. The cinema was showing a film depicting those freed from the concentration camps; twice my Aunt watched the film to see if she could see Annie or the boys. During the war there was no communication between Curacao and Holland but both countries

could correspond with America before they were in the war. A second cousin of my Grandmama, Annette Snapper, lived in Wisconsin and, acted as a post office for the family. One day, just before the end of the war, she contacted my Aunt and Uncle to tell them that she had received a letter from Annie, written in German, to say that she and the boys were OK but that Jaap had died after contracting a chest infection from working on the road gangs. Tante Kitty was overjoyed and immediately set about getting a message to her mother and brother in England. Annette had had the letter translated into English before sending it to New York. The letter arrived. My Aunt came home from work one day and saw my Uncle waiting for her outside the hotel. He looked dreadful and she knew something awful had happened. He had the original letter in his hand and he had realised what had happened – no-one had looked at the date. The letter was a year old and by the time my Aunt saw it her sister and nephews were already dead. It was obvious to the younger sister that Annie had been very scared. The family could only guess why it was written in German or how it had been sent. The family theory is that she wrote it in German so that the guard could see that it was innocuous and maybe he had, therefore, agreed to post it. Who knows? There is just so much that we don't know – and never shall.

Oom Siem asked the Dutch Government if he could stay in America and they approached the State Department. Papers were prepared allowing them to live and work in the States, and they went to Canada for the day to emigrate to the United States of America. But what could he do? He spoke to Mr Crena de longh and asked if there might be a place for him in the new World Bank. When the World Bank opened for business on 25 June 1946, under President Eugene Meyer, Mr Crena de longh became the first Treasurer and within a week he had asked Oom Siem to join him, one of just a handful of people who started the World Bank. However, in choosing an able assistant, Mr Crena de longh had to let his secretary go – family members were not allowed to work for the Bank. Mr Crena de longh told my Aunt that it had been the toughest decision he had ever had to make! In later years my Aunt would ask him if he had made the right decision – Mr Crena de longh never replied!

With Oom Siem in Washington, Tante Kitty remained in New York to close down the office and send everything back to Holland and it was late Autumn before she moved to DC. And there they stayed. In 1952 Oom Siem became Director of Technical Operations and I used to listen entranced as he told me stories of the projects for which he had approved finance such as the building of the Tarbela, Mangla and Niger Dams, and other amazing feats of technology. On 1 March 1965, under the then President George D Woods, Oom Siem became Vice President. In those days, there were only two Vice Presidents one of whom had to be an American. As the President also had to be an American, becoming Vice President was the highest position my Uncle could achieve. When he retired in 1974, my Aunt and Uncle returned to New York, to the same street that they had lived on during the war, but this time on the East side.

Meanwhile, back in London, Papa continued to work for the British armaments factory and Mama worked in the personnel department of the Dutch Government in exile. At the end of the war she was asked to take her department back to Holland which she did in the summer of 1945. My parents then had to decide where to live, what to do. They also did not want to go back to Holland, they had lost too much, and decided to go to America to be with my Aunt and Uncle. Also, Mama wanted to have a child. She had put it off during the war because the future was too uncertain but now she had stopped working and time was running out; the gynaecologist had told her that if she wanted a child it would have to be now and she would only have one opportunity. From what Mama told me, Papa was not part of this decision and I think he was rather shocked to be presented with a daughter in July 1946. Mama had a difficult pregnancy and the doctor decided that I would have to be removed rather than allowed out in my own time. Mama was asked whether she wanted her baby born on 3, 4 or 5 July. She

decided on the fourth saying that this child would have to be very independent. My parents made arrangements to emigrate to America with their daughter. Oom Siem and Tante Kitty were helping with the paperwork and getting various sponsors on the other side of the Atlantic. Eventually, all the paperwork was in order and we were all set to emigrate when the British Government awarded my father and his family British citizenship in gratitude for his work with the British Government. And so on 14 May 1947, exactly seven years after arriving in England, my parents became British subjects by Imperial Certificate AZ26600. Some 40 years later when I was working in the Immigration and Nationality Department of the Home Office, one of my team located the official file. A weird moment.

As my Aunt and Uncle had not returned to Holland, the Dutch Government owed them a trip to Europe. This was converted into a return trip for my Aunt to go to England which she did in 1947. She arrived on the Queen Elizabeth and my parents drove her from Southampton to St John's Wood, in London, where in 1941 they had rented a flat. Whilst my parents parked the car, my Aunt went upstairs and was greeted by her mother holding me. The emotion of that moment when mother and daughter were reunited again after seven war torn years can only be imagined. The next year, Tante Kitty came again to London for a few months. She had paid for the trip by working for the Netherlands Embassy in Washington DC who contacted her every time anyone came from Holland who needed a bilingual secretary. My Grandmama was now living in a home and on 4 October she, her son, daughter, daughter-in-law and grandchild went out for the day. That evening, when she got back to her room, she wrote a letter to her 'Dear Children' saying what a lovely day she had had. That night, very peacefully, she died.

It is hard for me to begin to imagine the guilt that my family have lived with all these years. I was too little to know my Grandmama but the fact that she was alive when I was born has for some inexplicable reason been a source of comfort to me. I suppose something about there being a next generation after all which must have seemed unlikely with the murder of her grandsons. When I was still at school, we were doing a religious project and I was asked whether I and my parents believed in God. I knew that Mama considered herself an atheist but I did not know about Papa. So as children do, without any thought or preamble, I asked him. His reply 'not any more' was to me then, and still is, the saddest thing I had ever heard. Papa was the first of the remaining four to die in 1976. Mama continued until 1990 and my Uncle until 2001. I think that my Uncle's guilt was the worst to witness. He had lost every single member of his family and whenever anyone remarked how successful he had been he always answered 'yes, and for that I had to lose my parents and all my family'. With so few of us, it was inevitable that Tante Kitty and Oom Siem have been like a second set of parents. In fact during long stays in Washington over the summer school holidays, I frequently called them Mama and Papa. Now there is only my Aunt and me, separated by thousands of miles of ocean. I dread the day when there will only be one of us left. I am constantly being reminded of the fact that I have no next of kin in this country: passport application, going into hospital, going on holiday etc. I am very lucky in my friends, one of whom I name as my next of kin. But as wonderful and as important to me as my friends are, I cannot help wondering what might have been had I had siblings and cousins; and known Annie, the Aunt that apparently I so take after.

To this day the thing that amazes and impresses me most about my five is the strength of mind and character they showed by being able to just up and leave, and, with the exception of a toothbrush, leave behind absolutely everything. I hope, that should I ever be put to the test I shall be able to show the same strength.

Jacky Erwteman
July 2004

PS:

That day, when I am the only one left, came on 12 October 2010, when Tante Kitty died, exactly 71 years after she and my Oom married.