

Grandma's Book

Chapter 1

The Early Years



This is a little history of my life as a child growing up in Holland. Things have changed a lot and I would like my grandchildren to be able to share in my past. These are some tales of other times.

First of all, I was born in the city of Utrecht. So were my brother, my mother and her father, Edmond Goddefroy.

Utrecht is an ancient city, the capital of the province of Utrecht, containing a famous University founded in 1636. The city itself goes back to Roman times.

When I was two years old we moved to Eindhoven, a small city then.

My father worked as a draftsman for the Philips Company. It certainly was not the big company it is today. When he started there, they made mostly light bulbs, tubes for radios, and the radios themselves.

The Philips Company grew very fast and the city along with it. Everything was Philips dominated. I remember a Roman Catholic Church. It had a huge statue of a saint with his arms outstretched on top of it. People delighted in telling strangers that it was Mr. Philips up there.

Eindhoven is in southern Holland and is mostly Roman Catholic. This is a result of the Spanish occupation that Holland endured for eighty years. In northern Holland, people are mostly Protestant. So, although I was Protestant, I grew up with many Roman Catholic friends, which was very fascinating.

Catholic schools were not mixed. There was a boys' school and a girls' school in our neighborhood. Each neighborhood also had its own church with a priest in charge. The priest was called Mr. "Pastoor" and his assistant was called Mr. "Kapelaan". The priest was very powerful and his word was law. When he came around the corner in his long skirts, (yes, they wore skirts, the name is sautane, I think) the children trembled.



One of my neighborhood friends was an altar boy. He also got to ring the church bells. How I envied him. On Sunday mornings all the church bells in the city would ring at the same time. During the war, the Nazis confiscated the bells, to be melted down for use in their war machine.

We lived in a new part of town, but the center of Eindhoven was still old, and I remember walking with my mother from downtown and seeing a lamplighter light the old gas lanterns that were still along the street.

There were cars and trucks of course, but a lot of things were still delivered by horse and wagon. Our milkman had a rather spirited horse, (I think he was a racehorse that had not quite made it) and the boys in the neighborhood knew just how to make that horse nervous. More than once I saw horse, wagon and milkman go down the street at an unbelievable speed.

We had neighborhood grocery stores, but a lot of smalltime merchants would come to the door to sell their wares. The shrimp man came once a week. He had a yoke on his shoulders from which hung two pails of shrimp. He'd ring a bell and yell "Fresh shrimp for sale!" He was a huge man with only one good eye and I was always a little afraid of him.

The baker and the green grocer came to the door, as did the egg man.

We even had a shoe cobbler who came once a week to see if there were any shoes to mend. One day he came to the door at the same time his former apprentice showed up. The apprentice had started his own business. A big brawl ensued on our doorstep with my mother refereeing. I'll never forget that either.

A couple of times a year you'd see Turkish and Persian people selling small rugs. They'd go from door to door also.

As I remember it, we also had quite a few beggars. My mother never failed to give them either a few pennies or a buttered slice of bread.

I must mention a smithy we had in the neighborhood. The horses of the local milk factory were shod there. The blacksmith had two sons who took those horses back to the dairy. They did this by riding bareback at breakneck speed. You could hear them coming and if you were playing in the street you got out of there in a hurry. Sparks flew from under their hooves on those cobblestone streets.

If something like that happened now, half the police force would be out there and there would be a big write-up in the paper. I don't think there were many complaints though, for those boys did it regularly. I can even remember what they looked like. One was a redhead and the other had black hair.



As children we played in the street a lot. There was not that much traffic. Of course bicycles were everywhere. At the age of six or seven you got your own bike. This was not a toy, mind you; no riding on sidewalks with it. In fact, I remember learning traffic safety rules in school at a very young age, because after all, everyone, young and old alike rode a bike.

We did not have a car and neither did any of my friends' parents. We did not even have a telephone. There was not much need for it.



When I started first grade, it was at a brand new school. They were very progressive. One of the things they tried was to teach us to print without learning cursive. This lasted for four years, but we were stuck with it.

Teaching French started in the fifth grade. During Napoleon's reign he put his brother Louis on the throne. The Dutch rather liked him and French became all the rage. Of course French was the court language in those days. You'd be surprised how many French words there are in the Dutch language. German was started in the seventh grade and English in the eighth. All were compulsory!

School hours when I was in grade school were from 8:45 until 11:45 with a two hour break for lunch. We went back at 1:45 and stayed until 4:00. My

father came home from work at noon also and we had our hot meal then. Our supper consisted of bread and butter and whatever there was around to put on the bread. We always had tea with it. It was the same for breakfast. I never had dry cereal until I came to this country.



My father was born in a village called "De Steeg". This is near Arnhem, a city where a big battle was fought at the end of World War II. The allies lost the battle.

My father's family consisted of six girls and two boys. His father was a tailor who catered to the aristocracy, making uniforms for them. He had a wooden leg, having had an accident in which he lost his leg. He died when my father was just a little boy.

His mother and older sisters tried to continue the tailor business, but it just did not work out, so they converted their house into a guesthouse in the summertime. That part of Holland was very beautiful, with Heather fields as far as the eyes could see and a lot of woodland.

My brother remembered how the house always smelled of freshly ground coffee. He thinks they roasted the coffee themselves. I don't remember those things because my grandmother had to sell the house when I was quite young.



My father came out of a very strict Calvinistic type household. Sundays were awful. I do remember rather lengthy prayers at mealtime and bible reading once a day after the main meal. That was at my grandmother's house, not ours.

My mother, on the contrary, grew up in a liberal environment, which made for a lot of friction with my father's family. My father dropped his church membership right after my folks were married. I really don't know why. He never went to church after that. He never even discussed religion. My mother did go some and it was left to us children to determine whether we wanted to go. I did go and went to Sunday School, but I don't think my brother Rein went much. We weren't baptized and I doubt my mother ever was.



In the summertime we always spent a week at the seashore. We didn't always visit the same place every time. I have such fond memories of those times.

Holland has a beautiful coastline with sand beaches and beautiful dunes. At least it was like that then. We went by train of course, and just how our luggage got to our destination, I have no idea. I do know we did a lot of walking and sometimes rented bicycles as well.

We had a lot of family living in Utrecht, which we visited regularly, always going by train. Utrecht had a tram system, which Eindhoven did not have. We kids loved to go places by tram. I wonder if buses have replaced them by now. Probably.



It was also my privilege to see both the "Graf Zeppelin" and the "Hindenburg", German dirigibles, fly over our town at night as well as in the daytime. What a sight! You could hear them coming, a deep rumbling sound. At night the cabin lights would be all lit up. Unbelievable! It made a great impression on me.

Speaking of Germans, my mother told me that when she finished high school she became a telephone operator and worked for the central office in Utrecht. Once, working on the night shift, she took a call from the German authorities asking for permission to let Kaiser Wilhelm and his family come over the border. They were hoping to find exile in Holland. (This was granted. He lived the rest of his days on an estate in Holland. Holland had remained neutral in World War I). It was such excitement for a young woman.

My mother was very musical and we were taken to an occasional concert at a young age. My brother was musical also, but it passed me by. I enjoy listening to music though and so did my father.

He was a rather quiet man who took me to the library on the back of his bicycle and read me the books I picked out. I don't remember my mother ever reading to me. My father was very good at fixing things. He once made me a beautiful pair of stilts. I wonder what ever became of them.

I was very good at most of the games we played on the streets. Everything had its season. Jumping rope, roller skating, playing marbles etc., all happened at certain times of the year, every year. I have never been able to figure out how this came about.

Our climate is rather mild, with a lot of rain. I remember some winters we had hardly any snow or ice firm enough to skate on. We had a little pond at the end of our street where I learned to ice skate. My father taught me. That place was later filled in. During the war people grew vegetables there.

Vegetables were a very important part of our diet. We had potatoes every day, without exception. We did not eat nearly as much meat as we do here in America. The Dutch are not noted for their cuisine, but, oh, their breads and fancy baked goods! My mouth waters just thinking about it. On Saturday afternoons we went to a special little shop where they made the crustiest rolls and breads you ever tasted. We kids got to pick what we wanted.

Our houses had back yards which were surrounded by high fences, so we did not really see that much of our neighbors. We lived in row houses. Only the rich lived in separate houses. That has changed somewhat these days, but Holland is still one of the most densely populated countries in the world.



I have come to a dead end in this narrative, due to the fact that it is impossible to describe the atmosphere of the place.

The sounds in the street, hearing people walking past your house in the morning on their way to early mass, every day of the week, the sound of bicycle bells, I remember them all. I noticed every time I went back for a visit that it even smelled different. It has probably to do with our proximity to the sea.

I purposely have not touched on the war years. That is a different story that started May 10, 1940 when we were overrun by the Germans.



Oh, yes, one thing I must talk about is the rigid class system we had. I was not aware of it while I was just a kid, but the fact is my parents did not associate with people who worked with their hands, like factory workers, but neither did they socialize with highly educated people, like lawyers, doctors and the like. There were worker neighborhoods, middle class neighborhoods and the more wealthy neighborhoods, and that's where you stayed.

We had a young girl come every morning to help with the housework. She even polished our shoes. Also, once a week a woman came to do the heavy cleaning. What a production!



And for the younger generation, which might read this story, only people in rural areas wore wooden shoes – farmers and such.

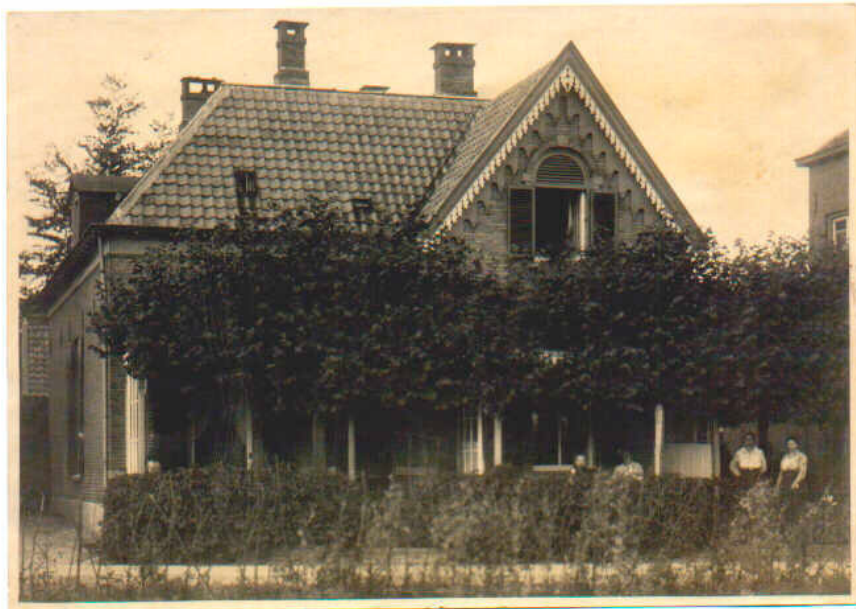
Back then there were still areas of the country where they wore their own type of costumes. One could tell what part of the country a woman was from by the type of cap she wore.

I can still picture them to this day. The most elaborate ones were in Friesland. The women had a thin golden helmet with a lace cap over it. I

liked the hats the women from Zeeland wore the best. Of course these were country people or fisherfolk.



This describes pretty much the early part of my life. When the war began, things changed rather drastically. That will be my next tale.



My father's house in the village of
De Steeg



At the seashore



Dressed for Carnival
in front of my house



My mother, brother Reinder
myself and my Dad



Reinder and Truus



Taken in 1925
Vader, Moeder and
Broertje Reinder