



THAT WE MIGHT BE FREE PART 3

Every picture tells a story doesn't it? We also know that there are two sides to every story. To hear both sides and decide who is right or wrong ends up being a matter of the listeners' judgement and morals.

When talking about history and WWII, I often hear many stories. Sometimes the words have to be translated for me but watching the storyteller is often a story in itself. To watch the face of a man, who has lived 70 years or more of his life light up with the radiance of youth, is a story in itself. The tempo of the conversation accelerates; the far away look in the misty eyes puts him on the scene again.

While visiting Germany's wine country, I had the opportunity to be enlightened from a German soldier's point of view. While enjoying the fruits of his labor and sharing interest and a glass of his premium wine, our German host at the zimmer frei cautiously opened up his memory when he learned that I was American.



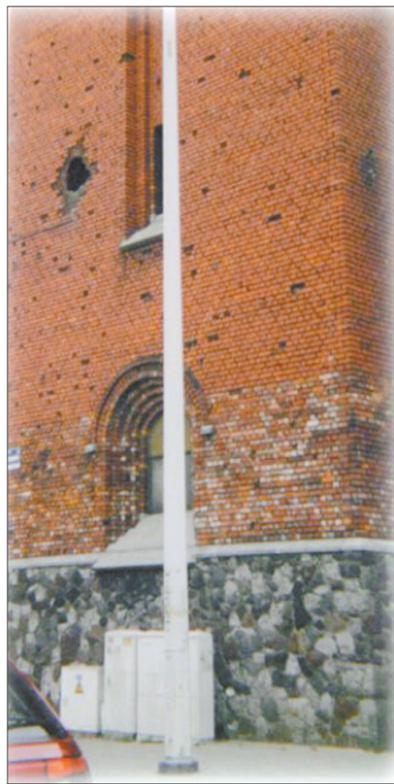
At the tender age of 18, Raimond had been forced into the German army as a carpenter. His skills were desperately needed to provide fast assistance building temporary strongholds. According to him, sometimes one job was abandoned, unfinished, as he was quickly sent off to build something somewhere else. He mentioned the feeling of uncertainty as he realized he was being shuffled from place to place and wondered if his superiors even knew what they were doing.

He eventually made it back to his town of Ediger to find the aftermath of an American air raid attack. His parents' home had been the final resting-place of one bomb. Coming through the roof, landing in his bedroom and then collapsing the two stories below, the bomb rested in the family's living room. They had summoned the fire department that came and dismantled the bomb and removed it. Several days later, the allied forces were advancing fast through the Mozelle river valley. Their intent was to cross the railway bridge that spanned the wide river and entered a tunnel in the mountain's steep side. If they managed to cross this bridge, their advance into Germany's interior would be swift. The men of the town quickly devised a bomb, using the defused American bomb. The tunnel entrance and the bridge were destroyed before the Allies arrival.

The distant look in his aging eyes and the victorious animation of his face slowly faded as he came back to present. Our curiosity over the memorial to the Jewish family in the town's cemetery remained a mystery. Also, the execution style murder of a wounded American pilot in the

small chapel remains unexplained. He refilled our glasses and extended a sincere apology to me for his part in an American plot. The subject quickly turned back to the cultivating of a delicious wine and the spell of the storyteller was broken.

When leaving the town of Ediger the next morning, we gazed at the tunnel entrance with new insight. His story ran through our heads and we could again imagine the struggle of placing the bomb, the destruction of a small peaceful town and the common lives and struggles for survival of fellow human beings.



The German forces quickly spread across Belgium. Within 18 days Belgium was occupied, including this small city of Ninove. The townspeople did what they could to protect the possessions of worth, though many ended up in the hands of their invaders. My friend's mother was a housekeeper for a well to do family. Knowing that most of the automobiles would be confiscated for war purposes the family set about hiding their automobile. In their cellar they removed the brick wall facing the ground beneath their garden. The dirt was removed under the garden and the car was safely tucked away underground. The cellar wall was replaced and the entire cellar was repainted so that no traces of the sealed compartment were visible. After the retreat of the German forces the wall was removed, the auto redeemed to daylight and the family had retained their possession. Also with the quick retreat of the Germans many confiscated articles were left behind or hastily retrieved by the rightful owners. As a gift for her loyalty and silence she received a pen and ink drawing from 1914 with the stamp of the German eagle and swastika on its reverse side.

Others didn't have it as comfortably planned and managed to improvise as the need arose. Trains continued to run across the landscape during the occupation providing transport of war goods and a means of survival for others. Young men would grease the tracks with lard (smout as it is called in Dutch) and wait for the gradual slowing of the train as it tried to pull itself up inclines. They would quickly sneak aboard and throw off as much coal as possible from the coal cars before the

train could reach the top of the incline and accelerate away. Others on the ground would be waiting with burlap sacks to gather the clinkers. The bags would then be sold to those who needed coal for warmth or taken home to provide fuel for their own stoves. The money made was then used to buy flour to make bread. The train drivers soon caught on to this trick but were tolerable. In return for the favor of "borrowing" a few clinkers of coal the train drivers were rewarded with tobacco from the local fields for their cooperation!

My friend's father was an active member of the "resistance" at the time of the occupation. Known as the White Brigade, the resistance took their orders and directions from England. Using funny codes on the radio stations, "Mary plays with her dog" often sent men on dangerous missions. He held a management position within the Belgian Railway and was often a part of the resistance operations at his station. During the night he would sneak back to the station and crawl on his stomach under the waiting railcars loaded with Russian prisoners of war. Through the loosened floorboards of the train he would pass up the employees' daily ration of bread that he had managed to collect for the starving prisoners. In turn they would give him whatever trinket or currency they had in their pockets for his kindness.

Many times the train boards at the stations were tampered with. Time schedules were altered to make trains loaded with German bombs appear to be ahead of schedule when in truth they were rerouted to another track. Often the misinformation gave the resistance time to put their plans into action. In the dark of night tracks were disconnected, sections were dismantled and replaced without support so that a train would derail. The delay in arrival of the German war supplies often gave the air support time to stage an attack and destroy trainloads of bombs or sections of tracks critical to the German advancement. A night train loaded with V1 bombs destined for France met its death outside of Kortrijk. Unfortunately, nearly 1200 local residents also lost their lives in this air raid.

Every town has its hero. His name was known but not put on a statue for public admiration. Sometimes his name was mentioned in reverence, as the one who went above and beyond what was normal. I have heard stories about "Steel Miel," whose real name was Emiel. He was the one who walked into the pub and shot the local town informant to the Germans. This particular informant had given names of many of his townspeople. These people were never seen again. He was later known to have hidden in ditches and then in camouflaged attics. He was seen in broad daylight passing the crucial information to the plane that landed in the local

farmer's field. He was the one with the nerves and the muscles to stand up to the Germans. After it was all over he was the one to receive that special Medal of Honor and bravery for going beyond.

Of course, every town also has its collection of collaborators. Not all were bad. My friend's grandfather was forced to board a train in Ninove on the Weggevoerdenstraat. Forced against his will, he was taken to Germany to work in the war factories. He fortunately escaped after physically confronting six German guards and made his way back to Belgium in time for the liberation. His son had better luck with the local collaborators and was spared the trip to Germany because of their childhood friendship. To this day, nearly 60 years later, in this little city of Ninove, there are still family names spoken as though one had tasted a bad taste. Those families are still outcast from social functions, avoided on the sidewalks and whispered about after they have passed by. It is still mentioned to each other the fact that so and so's father had a German uniform hanging in the closet. That person's sister dated a German guy. They cut off her hair in the public square and to this day she still is treated with "the Scarlet Letter" approach. After the mention of the family name, Zwarte or Black is always mentioned to stress a point. A look of disgust followed by a shake of the head is often the reaction of the speaker.

In daily living we read about historical accounts. We remember the stories of our grandparents. We remember the vacations taken to some memorial park when we were kids and all the input is stashed away for some future application. I know I cannot recite how this war of wars started. I cannot tell you where the turning point battles were that stopped the nightmare. I only know what I have seen with my own eyes.

Wars are a lot closer to my door than when I lived in the states. I have heard stories from witnesses and have watched their face and body reactions. I have experienced the tears of compassion, feelings of despair and felt the internal fire of anger. I have admired the hero, protested the injustice and scolded the indifference. I have not lived through a war in my backyard. I have not had to make a choice of risking my life for what I thought was right. I have not seen my neighbor or my closest friend destroyed before my eyes. I do know this much. I have developed a very deep appreciation for those Americans in military uniforms who are stationed in all corners of the world. I have realized how much I have taken for granted in the country of freedom.

My next article will sum up the climax of this nightmare and give credit to the American men and the military in this foreign country.

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