

## Jeanette Ringold

### Wartime Experience: Hidden

I was born on December 20, 1939, in Amsterdam, Holland. When I was five months old, on May 10, 1940, Holland was invaded by Germany. My parents remained in Amsterdam, as did many of their relatives and friends. Life went on, but it became more circumscribed because of the Nazi occupation. From a letter of that period, it appears that my father's mother, who survived the war, was living with us during that time. But I have no memories at all of my parents and of my almost three years with them.

In June of 1942, my brother was born. My parents named him Abraham Benjamin, after my mother's brother who still was in Holland. During the summer of 1942, conditions worsened for Dutch Jews. There were regular roundups, and Jews from all over Holland were forced to relocate to Amsterdam. Life had obviously become too dangerous, and at that point my parents sent my brother and me away with one of the resistance groups that placed Jewish children in homes of non-Jews to hide them from the Nazis. Although I was close to three years old at the time, I don't recall any of this.

When I was 23, during a 1963 visit to a relative in France, I learned more of what happened to my parents before they were sent to their death. After giving us to the Resistance organization, my parents fled Holland. They managed to get through Belgium and France into neutral Switzerland, which sent them back to France because they had no children with them. In France they were caught, and from Lyon they were sent to Drancy and then on July 18, 1943 to Auschwitz where, according to documents sent to me by the Red Cross, they died between July 21 (arrival) and January 27, 1945 (liberation of Auschwitz). Their last sign of life was a postcard sent from Lyon to their cousin Béatrice in Paris.

Once separated from our parents, my brother and I were brought to Deventer, a town in the Eastern part of Holland. There we were separated, for it was too dangerous to hide a brother and sister, a baby of a few months and an almost three-year-old, together. My brother was taken to the home of an old couple who had 3 or 4 other babies they took care of. They changed his name from Abraham Benjamin to Peter, a name that he uses to this day.

I have been told that I was in 8 different households before coming to the Janssens, my war foster parents, with whom I remained until the end of the war. They pretended that I was their "niece from Amsterdam", and I called them aunt Marie and uncle Theo. For my protection and theirs, the Janssens had to suppress everything about my previous life. I came to them with a small suitcase with clothes, precious in a time of increasing shortages. But they quickly got rid of one dress, which I insisted on calling my "Shabbat dress". Uncle Theo also told me that he had to stop me from talking about my father going to the synagogue and singing. The Janssens were strictly observant Catholics, and there was a cross above my bed to which I never had to pray. I loved the nativity they had at Christmas. It took up a whole wall of the living room. I also

played in the street with a neighbor girl my age, and I even was allowed to go to church a few times.

At one point, the Germans as well as the Allies were trying to bomb a bridge, which crosses the IJssel, a tributary of the Rhine, at Deventer where we lived, and bombings seemed to be going on day and night. For me, the air raids were most frightening: the horrible wailing of the air raid sirens, the noise of the planes overhead, the bomb blasts, and the visible destruction in town. At night I'd be picked up out of bed by one of the adults who would then carry me into the cellar, which was small and very dark and served as a bomb shelter. I had a tiny space, almost a hole in the wall that was mine. Only a small child could have fitted into it. The cellar was crowded, for the Janssens would often have three or four extra people, Jews or Resistance workers, hiding in their house.

Towards the end of the war, the Janssens themselves had to flee because their activities in the Resistance made staying in town too dangerous. On a cold winter's day during a heavy snowstorm, uncle Theo, aunt Marie and I walked from 7 in the morning until 2 in the afternoon to reach a farm in Broekland, a village 15 km from Deventer, where we spent the last few months of the war. I remember that uncle Theo and aunt Marie had a baby carriage and that I adamantly refused to ride in it. I guess that as a five-year-old I felt too grown-up for that. I clearly remember that long walk.

At the farm, I had to sleep in an old-fashioned "bedstee", a bed that is a closet in the wall, and of course the grown-ups insisted that the doors be closed at night. I remember being very scared of being pecked by the chickens, which I fed. But the greatest danger was one of which I was blissfully unaware. The farmer's wife, although quite anti-German, was also quite anti-Semitic, and she would have betrayed the Janssens and me if she had found out that I was Jewish. Fortunately, we all made it alive to a day at lunch when we looked out of the window and saw the "Tommys", the Canadians, on their tanks at the village blacksmith. I remember how we all got up from lunch, unheard of, and ran down the road to those tanks which were decorated with orange streamers and Dutch flags.

I have no memories at all from that day in May 1945 until August of that year when I was found and reclaimed at the Janssens by my mother's brother, Bram, and my one surviving grandmother (my father's mother). The relatives had placed an ad in the papers to locate me - a usual thing at that time. After the war, I lived for one year with one of my mother's cousins and her husband. After that year, I went to live with my uncle Bram and his new wife Hanny. At this time, I first became aware that I had a brother, Peter, who was living with them. It was very difficult to get used to that reality. By then, they also had their own new baby girl. In 1948, they had a second child, a boy. We lived in Amsterdam until we immigrated to the United States in 1954. Because adoption was not possible in Holland until 1956, Peter and I could not come into the United States at the same time as our uncle and aunt, our guardians. To remedy this situation, a private bill, sponsored by Senator Lehman, was passed in the Senate.

I didn't see the Janssens again until 1976. When I would ask my aunt and uncle about them, I was told that they didn't want to see me again because it would make them sad, but this explanation was never really satisfactory. In the early 70's, I received a letter from Uncle Theo, and we then started corresponding. When my husband Alan and I were in Holland in 1976, I decided on the spur of the moment to visit the Janssens. After this I visited them every time that I was in Holland. One time, our daughters went along to visit the Janssens; it was a memorable visit. They were so happy to see the girls, then 7 and 10, and to argue which one resembled me most! In 1985, the Janssens were posthumously honored by Yad Vashem. They are also among the "righteous among the nations" honored on plaques in the Holocaust Museum in Washington.