

Dina Angress

Wartime Experience – Hidden child in Holland

I was born on October 12, 1928, in Amsterdam, Holland. Growing up in the '30s and '40s as the oldest of three daughters in an orthodox Jewish family, had a lot to do with the forming of my character. I lived at the edge of the Amsterdam Jewish neighborhood, where my father, Dr. Issac Dasberg, practiced as a general physician. My family life was rich in Jewish culture and tradition. There were many aunts, uncles, cousins, and we visited frequently back and forth.

Of course, there were the grandparents, very revered as in any Jewish family in those days. I only knew one grandfather and him just for the first 4 ½ years of my life. He had been a well-known and very much-loved Rabbi in Holland in the community of Dordrecht, where my father and his five siblings were born and grew up.

After the grandfathers died, the grandmothers moved in with one of their children. My mother's mother lived with us, and my father's mother moved in with one of my father's brother's family. My father had four brothers and one sister, and my mother had one brother and one sister. It wasn't easy for the daughters or daughters-in-law to always have their mother or mother-in-law watch what they were doing and give all kinds of advice but generally life was harmonious.

My youngest sister and I attended the local Jewish elementary school. My middle sister had been afflicted with childhood rheumatism when she was two years old and wasn't home much. She was often away for various cures, none of which were of much help. But my parents kept trying to heal her. They finally had to put her in a full body cast, which stopped the rheumatic process, but left her badly crippled for the rest of her life. However, her brains made up for what her body lacked. Eventually she received her Ph. D. in the History of Education and was for many years full professor at the University system in Holland.

I was 11 ½ years old when the Germans invaded Holland. My father fought in the war as a medic. He was stationed at one of the airports but the battle in Holland only lasted five days, Then the Nazis started with all the restrictions. Jews had to wear "stars of David," we could only go to Jewish schools, we couldn't have bikes anymore, use public transportation, or go to parks or movies. Yet we had no other choice, so we obeyed. Anne Frank was one of my schoolmates, one class below me and her diary reflects a lot of my life and thoughts at that age.

I remember one day during one of the last Nazi raids in the Jewish quarter of the city, 12 Gestapo police, with drawn bayonets, came storming into our house, demanding that my mother pick up her children and follow them to the waiting police wagons outside. My mother flatly refused She told them in German that her children were sick (we were just getting over the chickenpox), and she wasn't taking them out in the cold. When they insisted, she took them up to the bedroom where we laid under the blankets, shivering for fear, still full of pock scars. She told them to "look for yourselves that these children have smallpox. She finally had hit on a

soft spot in one officer, who then commanded his men to leave. They retreated, mumbling to themselves, cursing these “goddamn Jews,” who gave them so much trouble! Afterwards, I hugged my mother, too dumbfounded to cry, overcome by a mixture of nervous exhaustion and relief.

When I was 15 at the start of another raid, my father could hardly take it anymore and he was just about ready to turn himself and all of us in. He had just seen his 68-year-old mother, as well as three of his brothers and his sister, and my mother’s sister, with their families, being taken to Westerbork, the Dutch camp from where Jews were sent to Germany and Poland.

My mother took charge, ordered us out of the house, each wearing three sets of clothes looking as inconspicuous as possible. She gave us directions to go to the house of some non-Jewish friends at the edge of the ghetto. From there we were brought to our respective hiding places by a Jewish woman, Ans Van Dam, who was very active in the Dutch Resistance. My father and mother went to a different place, walking in opposite directions to attract the least possible attention. My middle sister was in neutral Switzerland when the war started, so she was safe. My parents and my younger sister were somewhere else unknown to me.

I landed with a young couple who had a seven-month-old baby. The young doctor, Walle Nauta, who took me in, was a friend of another doctor, whom my father had befriended in the army. He and his wife Ellie put their lives, and that of their baby in danger when they offered to do this. I owe my life to them and the lives of my children and grandchildren. The Nauta family tried to take over as parents and friends and fill in wherever possible to make life as comfortable and reassuring to me as they could. I listened to many good discussions about the war, religion, sex and life in general. I had been very naïve and still was that way. And I learned about art and religion. I didn’t get any satisfactory clarification from my parents about Judaism, nor in school, where everything was always very rigid, all black and white, with never any room for discussion and I think this laid the groundwork for my turning away from religion altogether.

The hiding time was a big change in my life. I had been very protected in my childhood and danger and uneasiness had been kept far from me. Now I was on my own. I was subjected to whatever came along. Since I was living in another town where people didn’t know me, I was able to go out, so I didn’t experience being locked up for two years or longer, as so many others had to endure. Nobody expected me to be Jewish. I had falsified identification papers that I never needed to use. It was scary at times; for instance, when I took the dog for a walk at night in the park and the German soldiers from the nearby barracks were taking an airing there, too. Luckily, the dog was big and looked ferocious, so I was left alone. It all seemed quite unreal. And even though I had gotten to be very fond of Ellie and Walle, I couldn’t wait to get back to my family and the normalcy of life.

As soon as the war was over, I went back to Amsterdam, where my parents were trying to re-establish themselves. My parents were too busy to pay much attention to me in the form of praise or encouragement, but I did feel wanted and needed and that felt good. Our house had been demolished in the war, so we moved into the one of friends, who unfortunately, as with

so many, had not returned from the camps. It became family headquarters and refugee haven for many relatives who were returning from the concentration camps, their heads shaved, some with tuberculosis and all undernourished.

I worked hard those summer months, putting all my newly acquired skills to work, cooking, washing, cleaning for all those people, nurturing them, mothering my then 11 ½-year-old sister, assisting my 14-year-old sister, who was severely crippled. Our immediate family had, by and large, come through the war years better than most. Of my six uncles and six aunts, two aunts and one uncle successfully hid from the Nazis in Holland with six of their children. Two uncles and two aunts survived the camps of Bergen Belsen and Theresienstadt with nine of my cousins. My paternal grandmother lived through the concentration camp experience as well. At age 70, she returned to Amsterdam and lived there in good health for another 16 years.

But three uncles, two aunts and four cousins were killed: one family in Auschwitz, one uncle in Mauthausen and one uncle and aunt and their youngest son of typhoid fever in Bergen Belsen, leaving their three other children orphans. This last uncle had been a famous Rabbi in Holland and he wasn't able to throw off his rabbinical stature. He was a proud man, wouldn't shave his beard off or bow down in any way to the German guards in the camp. His spirit wouldn't be broken until his wife died of typhus. Then he gave up and three days later he, too, died. Many of the extended family was killed in the camps as well: dozens of my great-aunts and uncles, second and third cousins, almost a hundred altogether.

It was very hard on my parents, even though so many survived. It wasn't only a matter of numbers: with each loss a piece of their hearts was torn away. That's why it was so helpful for all of us, hidden survivors, to be able to open our doors for the relatives returning from the camps.

I hated to have to go back to school in September 1945, to a normal daily routine. I couldn't keep up with those 15-year-olds scholastically but felt way ahead of them maturity-wise. Others chose to go to a special program for Jewish children, who had lost time during the war. I didn't want to go there either and I struggled for half a year and then gave up, much to my parents' dismay.

I was strong willed and persisted in wanting to become independent, so I finally got a job in a daycare center as a teacher aide for nursery school children. I loved that and felt that I did a good job. Looking back, I think that that period started me off on my desire for a career in social work.

But my father thought that I should have some sort of skill, since I was planning to get married and leave home soon. He talked me into a course in midwifery, which I completed successfully and enjoyed. I helped bring 12 children into this world. A tremendous experience for an 18-year-old. I believe it laid the groundwork for the ease and happiness with which I went into and completed each of my five pregnancies.

Marriage at 19 to my boyfriend Hans Angress from Junior High School came as a natural. We had gotten to know each other at 13 years of age. We were “going steady” when we had to go into hiding, of course in different places, not knowing anything about each other all during that time. But we had both been thinking about each other all that time. No sooner was the war over, when he stood on my doorstep, and we were delighted to have found each other once again. His father had been killed in Auschwitz, his mother and one brother had also survived their hiding experience, and his oldest brother, who had emigrated to the USA before the war started, had been one of the troops liberating Europe.

Hans had no patience going back to school, either. He felt he needed to get a job and make a living, which he did for as long as it took to get a visa to join his brother in the U.S. in February 1947. In December of that year, he was back in Amsterdam with a High School diploma in his pocket and a job waiting for him in California - quite a feat, in ten months, for a 19-year-old with little education or job experience. But he was determined to come back to get me, and my parents had no more excuses to keep me from joining him. We got married and moved to America, where started on a dairy farm in Marin County, north of San Francisco on Tomales Bay.

Our marriage lasted for 30 years. Our kids grew up beautifully and succeeded in almost everything they set out to do, growing up to be wonderful people, loving, caring, cheerful and healthy. Our house was a real home for them and their friends, some of whom became our foster children. I received my Master’s Degree in Social Work, doing my thesis on adoption, which has had a warm spot in my heart ever since we adopted our son.

And so, life goes on. It has been rich and varied. I At times I talk to students in local classrooms about my war experiences. They always seem quite impressed, and I find it very important that young people hear about those trying times. Maybe that way the events that occurred during World War II won’t so easily be forgotten and that may help prevent similar atrocities from ever happening again.