

Chapter 2

Fr van Engelen's story

On Saturday, 5 May 1945, in a crumbling hotel in a small bombed and blackened provincial town in Holland, along the route from Arnhem to Amsterdam, General Foulkes, commander of the Canadian army, sat opposite General Johannes Blaskowitz, the commander of the German 25th Army Corp, whose men had occupied The Netherlands for five long years of increasing horror and brutality. They and their staff sat at a miserable wooden table in the hotel *De Wereld* in Wageningen, amid the ruins of one of the twentieth century's two great ideological holocausts. Without ceremony, the commander of the Canadian army read out the unconditional terms of surrender to the stony faced Blaskowitz whose final terse 'Jawohl, Herr Oberbefehlshaber' acknowledged his new masters.

News of the formal surrender sent a shudder of joy and relief through the Dutch population. For despite the spontaneous unfurling of flags that had been hidden for five years, despite the handshaking, hugging and dancing on the streets, the Dutch mind and spirit were pierced through with the suffering and murder of so many innocent people, pierced through with memories of the ruthless unrelenting Nazi jackboot, the forced labor, the summary executions, and the unforgiving group reprisals for resistance to the occupation. Nor could the significance be resisted of the fate of those fellow Dutch citizens who had been rounded up and transported to Germany and Poland. And now in the spring of 1945, many of the population were still suffering from the recent *hongerwinter*, the cause of widespread starvation. Still, it was time for celebration. It was time to celebrate the newly restored freedom. The following day, Sunday, the churches were filled with people giving thanks. The celebrations continued throughout the day, spilling on to Monday.

It was a fine sunny day that Monday, 7 May 1945 in Amsterdam, a day to lift the spirits. While glinting and whirring Allied planes were dropping desperately needed relief supplies outside the city, people were

gathering in the city centre to welcome the Canadian army. Streams of people filled Het Rokin, Kalverstraat and Damrak, the main roads to the Dam, Amsterdam's main square. Shortly after two o'clock, an emaciated, unshaven man dressed in rags and with a distant expression emerged from Vondelpark, the main public park just beyond the outermost canal on the southern side of the city. He brushed bits of grass and other plant matter from his ragged clothes and set off along Stadhouderskade, the road running along the canal. Eventually he stopped and gazed vacantly in the direction of busy Leidseplein on the other side of the canal. There was a patrol of German soldiers moving cautiously among the people on the square. He stood there for a minute, expressionless. He crossed the road and walked along the canal back in the direction he had come.

With the Rijksmuseum on his right he crossed the bridge over the first of the canal rings that formed the defenses of the ancient city on the Amstel. He continued along Spiegelgracht towards the city centre, taking no notice of the peaceful glimmering waters around him. He crossed over the next two canal rings and came to Herengracht, the first of the canals marking in the early 1600s the expansion of the medieval city limits to make room for Amsterdam's fabulously wealthy merchants and businessmen.

Here he paused. The vacant look faded from his face. He was in the centre of the richest residential area of Calvinist Holland's heyday. All around were the sumptuous examples of Dutch Renaissance, classicist and Louis architectural styles. Residences, less grand but in similar styles, stretched back along the way he had come. The southern area of Amsterdam formed by the canals Singelgracht, Prinsengracht, Keizergracht and Herengracht would be forever a testimony to the city's most glorious period of business, trade, finance, artistic achievement and learning. The unkempt man contemplated the surroundings for some minutes. At length, with an inaudible sigh, he turned left and headed along Herengracht towards Leidsestraat.

Some minutes later he was mingling with the stream of people heading along Kalverstraat towards the Dam. He took little notice of the people around him, and they noted only another of their countrymen who had lived the life of a beggar during the German occupation. The only sign that the beggar was aware of his surroundings came with a few glances at a watch that was hidden under the sleeves of a dirty dilapidated coat several sizes too big for his emaciated body.

Halfway along Kalverstraat, he stopped outside the Sts Peter and Paul church, known locally as the 'Papegaai'* – the code word used to indicate the clandestine Catholic church behind the Kalverstraat during

**Parrot*

the period when the Calvinist elite were not prepared to tolerate papist superstition. It was open. Glancing up at the stone parrot sheltering in a niche in the narrow neo-gothic facade of the church, the beggar took off his dirty black beret and went inside. The cool shaded atmosphere seemed for a moment to overwhelm him. He gazed at the carved wooden gothic-style altars, until his eyes became accustomed to the dimly lit interior. He knelt beside the crucifix that hung on the left-hand side. At the sound of a clock in the distance striking three, he put his left hand on the feet of the crucified Christ and struck his breast three times. A minute later he was on his way again in the same vacant manner. Within sight of the Dam, he came to a stop.

Fr Jos van Engelen, ever cautious despite the effectiveness of his disguise and vacant expression, fixed his eyes on the people milling around the *Grote Club*, the German officers' club, at the end of Kalverstraat. The building overlooking Dam square was barricaded and his countrymen were making little effort to hide their scorn. Some German officers came to the first floor window on the Kalverstraat side and looked down. The priest sidled to an alleyway on his right and by way of Het Rokin arrived shortly after on the square. The officers' club was now on his left in the next block. He saw several SS officers appear on the front balcony, and then disappear.

Bumped and pushed, he began to make his way between the people. Over near the entrance to Damrak, the street leading to Centraal Station, the barrel organ *Het Snotneusje*, was lustily grinding out its tunes. The familiar sound of the organ music seemed suspended in the air, unwilling to grasp the people. The priest could not help dropping his guard as he surveyed the packed square and the officers' club. A flock of pigeons suddenly fluttered up over the crowd and flew away over the Royal Palace. He walked on. A shot rang out. He swung round and saw a German soldier on the roof of the *Grote Club* come forward with his rifle to his shoulder, firing. Then sputtering machine-gunfire above the single shots. The crowd rushed for the streets leading from the Dam.

A wave of humanity pushed him into Damrak. Spotting a shallow recess in the facade of the nearest building he pushed himself into it as the wave of people streamed by. There was no screaming or crying, just the heavy sighing and breathing of the people trying to keep from being trodden underfoot. Then a terrified young woman carrying a baby was being pushed towards him. He reached out as she began to topple and squeezed her beside him. Grasping bodies began to fall and pile up while others crawled over and between them. Then it was over. The Dam was empty. The streets were empty and the shooting had stopped. All that was left were the bodies of the fallen, the mangled bikes and

small tradesmen's carts, shoes, prams, and the unrecognizable debris that were once objects carried or worn by people. Those who had saved themselves by crouching behind the now bullet-riddled *Snotneusje* had taken their chance and fled in the direction of Damstraat.

The priest took the woman firmly by the shoulders and hurried her to the nearest shop entrance. Still clutching her baby, she sank to the floor among the other battered and traumatized people who had sought shelter there. Breathing in gasps, she leaned up against the display window. A man next to her was clutching his arm, trying to stem the flow of blood. Further into the shop, another man was lying groaning on the floor. Fr van Engelen gave the woman a reassuring pat on the shoulder and looked at the baby in her arms. Miraculously it was still asleep. He left them and went and knelt next to the dying man.

'I am a Catholic priest, meneer,' he said, whispering in his ear.

The man shook his head slightly and in a faint voice said, 'Hervormd.*'

The priest rested his hand softly against the man's cheek and still bending over him, bowed his head. At length the man took him feebly by his sleeve. Fr van Engelen brought his ear close to the man's mouth.

'From Leimuiden...' He stopped to get his breath. 'My bike... somewhere...' He stopped again.

'May I say a prayer with you?'

The man nodded and with rolling eyes tried to focus on the priest. His effort to speak was in vain. He closed his eyes.

'Jesus, Lord and merciful Saviour,' the priest whispered in the man's ear, 'look with mercy on your servant who in this hour humbly confesses all his weaknesses. Forgive him his sins and accept him into the bosom of your love.' He stopped, keeping his head bowed and his eyes closed. There was another feeble tug on his coat. The priest glanced at the man's face. His eyes were closed and the expression of pain was fading. He again put his mouth to the man's ear.

'Now Thou dost dismiss thy servant, O Lord, according to Thy word in peace; Because my eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou has prepared before the face of all peoples: A light to the revelation of the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel.'

There was no further movement from the man. Fr van Engelen remained in prayer for a minute. When he lifted his head, a look of peace had replaced the contorted expression of pain. 'Deo Gratias,' he said softly. He became aware that his knee was in the way of a trickle of blood. He looked around. No, the people were still too shocked to do anything. He went back to the young woman sitting on the floor, staring vacantly at the ceiling. He knelt down and took her hand.

'You are safe now. It is finished, I think.'

**Dutch Reformed*

'Ja, meneer,' she said, shaking a little. 'You saved me and my baby. Dank U. Dank U.' She glanced at the man lying in his own blood. 'Poor man, to be killed on this day. But my husband, meneer, we were together just before the shooting. Then he went in the direction of Nieuwendijk to find a friend. He said he would be back shortly. Where could he be?'

The fresh young face – she could not be more than twenty-years-old – the absence of make-up, the hair drawn back around her head, the loose fitting, modest dark-coloured clothing said much to him. The regional accent was unmistakably that of the Province of Zeeland. Still holding her hand, he said, 'Let's say a prayer that he has been preserved from harm.' The woman seemed to compose herself. Leaving her hand in the priest's, she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she said, 'Thank you, meneer. I should have done that at once.'

'I think it best that you wait here for the moment. Your husband will be looking for you. It is likely that he will begin where he left you. He has to think that you were pushed in this direction.' He let go her hand and stood up.

The young woman stroked her baby's head a few times. 'Ja, meneer, I think you are right. Thank you again.'

'I will stay with you until he finds you.'

She nodded slowly and then looked at the priest as if she had just become aware of his appearance. Questioning eyes passed over the sunken cheeks, the unshaven face under the dirty beret, and the ragged clothes covering a deprived figure. She appeared on the point of saying something, but looked away. A few moments later: 'Look, meneer, my baby has hardly noticed a thing. She has slept through it all.'

'What's her name?'

'Gerda.'

The young woman stiffened as air outside the shop was rent with bursts of gunfire coming from the Dam. The people stiffened. The gunfire ceased, to be replaced by the swelling roar of an approaching vehicle.

'They're heading for the station,' said the priest, as the roar faded in that direction. 'They won't bother us anymore. It is the last of it. I am sure.'

She relaxed, as did the others. Some moments later, a young man came rushing into the shop. He stopped dead in front of the young woman. 'You are safe!' He knelt and put his hand carefully on the baby's head. The baby stirred. Fr van Engelen gave him a comforting pat on the back. The young man started and stared up at the priest.

'This man saved us,' said his wife. 'We owe him our lives.'

The young man stood up and looked Fr van Engelen up and down. He looked down at his wife and then back at the priest.

‘She was being pushed along with the crowd,’ said Fr van Engelen. ‘I prevented her from falling.’

The young man continued to stare at the priest.

‘Cees,’* the young woman pleaded, ‘he saved our lives. We would have been trampled to death if he had not grabbed me.’

Still the young man did not say anything. He looked at his wife and then again at the priest.

‘I am not what my appearance would lead you to believe.’

‘I believe you, meneer. But who are you?’

‘I have been working with the Resistance, with the Underground...’

‘What doing?’

‘What does it matter?’ said his wife. ‘Cees, please help me up and take me out of here.’ She began crying.

Cees gave the priest one more glance and then as if shaking himself out of his mood helped his wife to her feet. Taking the baby from her, he turned to head out of the shop, but then stopped. ‘Thank you, meneer.’

Fr van Engelen nodded.

‘Yes,’ said his wife, wiping her eyes, ‘we are indebted to you. Please tell us who you are.’

‘It’s not important,’ the priest said. ‘Do you have somewhere to go?’

‘Oh, meneer,’ said the young wife coming to him, ‘we have nothing. All our family have been killed. Our village has been destroyed. We are from Walcheren in Zeeland. There’s nothing.’

It was as he suspected. They were from one of the villages that had been destroyed in the German bombing or the Allied invasion. They were on their own. He took a grubby piece of paper and a pencil stub out of his trouser pocket and scribbled a few words.

‘Much of Walcheren is under water at the moment because of the bombing of the dykes, but you won’t starve if you can return there,’ he said, handing the piece of paper to the young woman. ‘If you can make your way there, one of these people will help you. In the meantime, go to that address in Amsterdam and mention “New Guinea”. You will get some temporary help and assistance to return south. God be with you.’

‘Thank you again, meneer,’ she said, glancing at the paper. ‘We owe you... But who are you?’

‘It’s not important at this moment. Take yourselves to safety.’

With a nod of gratitude, she returned to her waiting husband. The priest watched as she followed him out of the shop. He then turned to the dead man on the ground. The pool of blood had grown. He looked around. Some indistinct and haphazard conversation hung eerily in the

**Pronounced ‘Kayce’*

air. Then people from the Red Cross, accompanied by members of the Dutch scouts, entered the shop and immediately busied themselves with providing aid. The priest quietly left to continue his journey. Without bothering anymore to maintain his disguise, he crossed Damrak and turned into a small side street that led to Warmoestraat. He could hear occasional gunfire coming from Centraal Station. A few minutes later he was knocking on a door, his fatigue and worn spirits now weighing heavily on him. The door opened cautiously.

'Father, thank the Lord you are safe!' said an elderly man, standing in front of two women looking anxiously over his shoulder. 'We've been hearing gunfire. Some of the men have joined a detachment that has headed for the station.' He saw the blood on the priest's trouser leg.

'It's nothing,' said the priest. 'I'm safe but I am afraid some poor people have met their death on the very day for rejoicing.' With much attention, he was led inside. There was more gunfire. 'There will be no more shooting after this. The Nazis have performed their last barbarous act in Amsterdam. And now I need to rid myself of this appearance. Come on, now is the time for the *Te Deum!*'

A half an hour later in the secured attic of that house, Fr van Engelen, washed and shaved and fully vested for Mass, stood in front of a makeshift altar decorated with flowers. Candles gleaming reassuringly lit the dull windowless space that a group of old people had used to attend to their faith during the Nazi occupation. Fr Jos van Engelen slowly made the sign of the cross and began to speak the psalm that Catholics the world over heard at the beginning of every Mass.

Not far away stood Sint Nicolaaskerk on Oudezijds Voorburgwal. In 1578, Amsterdam's Calvinist elite confiscated it and renamed it the Oude Kerk.* A short distance from the ancient Sint Nicolaaskerk, now the Oude Kerk, on the very same Oudezijds Voorburgwal, the clandestine church of *Ons Lieve Heer op Solder*† was established for the proscribed Catholic population. The emancipation of Catholics in Holland was achieved in 1795, but it was not until well into the nineteenth century that Amsterdam's Catholics were free to erect their churches. On 7 February 1887, the neo-baroque Sint Nicolaaskerk was consecrated on Prins Hendrikkade opposite Het Centraal Station. The Holy Sacrament was transferred in solemn procession from the clandestine church on the Oudezijds Voorburgwal to the new church on 30 March 1887. While Fr van Engelen and his small aged congregation were attending to their thanksgiving Mass, the towers of the new Sint Nicolaaskerk looked down on the last deadly skirmish between the soldiers of the Third Reich and the local forces that had been guarding Amsterdam's major station.

While the priest was kneeling in silent prayer after mass, a note was

**Old Church*

†*Our Dear Lord in the Attic*

slipped into his hand. He looked around at the quickly disappearing message bearer. After a glance at the note he summoned the last of his energy and prepared to depart. 'I am needed,' he said to the inquiring looks from the raised heads beside him. The air was still and unbroken by gunfire as he made his way along the canal. He put out his hand to steady himself on the bollards and the occasional railing. Just one more task and he would be able to rest. Then he was standing at the door of the address marked on the note. The bright sunlight behind him glimmering in the canal waters shed no light in his hazy mind as he waited. The door was opened. A young smiling unrecognizable face welcomed him.

In the growing haze of his mind he thought it strange that the unblemished youthful face with full red lips had escaped the ravages of the war. He was shown to a comfortable armchair in what looked like a waiting room – a richly furnished and decorated room. Again he thought it strange. He struggled to draw the note from his pocket to ensure that he had understood it properly. But the haze enveloped him, followed by intermittent darkness and light as time seemed to stand still. Feelings of pleasure and revulsion passed over him as he struggled to keep his arms crossed over his chest. And the fresh pretty innocent face of the young woman with her heartfelt appeal always intruded as an unfathomable recrimination.

At the beginning of the following year, 1946, Fr van Engelen was walking with his brother over Marktplein⁵, the large square in the centre of Middelburg, the provincial capital of Zeeland. He had on his black religious habit, but in the chill of the winter morning, when people were hurrying to their work, nobody in that Protestant town was taking much notice. He walked with a slight limp and rested his hand every now and then on his brother's shoulder.

'Let's stop for a moment,' he said, grasping his brother's arm. 'I am sorry, Frans.'

'Nothing to be sorry about, Jos. Take your time.' Frans regarded his brother with concern. As frail as Jos was, he was a lot better than when he and his father had found him the previous year after much searching in a dark dirty room in a back street of Amsterdam, suffering from years of deprivation, and exhausted to the point of death. Nobody knew how he had got there. And Jos had been too ill to remember. The months of convalescing and family care had brought him slowly back to health, though frail.

They had stopped in front of the ruins of what until the war was one of the finest Gothic town halls in all of Europe. On 17 May 1940,

in an act of senseless destruction and cultural vandalism, the German air force sent its planes to bomb the people of Walcheren into submission. Almost the entire centre of Middelburg mostly made up of the finest examples of medieval and Dutch Renaissance buildings lay in ruins when the pilots turned towards Germany. The brothers regarded the blackened shell in silence. The stone figures representing the Counts and Countesses of the once Catholic province stood intact protected high up in their decorative niches.

'What would they say if they could talk?' said Frans eventually. 'I don't think we would want to hear.' He paused. 'This beautiful building, so much connection with our past, all destroyed in a moment. Will we ever rise above it and punish those who need to be punished?'

'Come now, we've got to have hope,' said the priest, after a while. He looked with affection at his younger brother whose efforts had been untiring in the search for him. In those difficult days directly after the war it had been no easy task. He did not know how he ended up in that dirty dark room after the slaughter on the Dam and the rescue of that young woman, no matter how much he thought about it. Flitting shades in a swirling darkness continually intruded on his consciousness; all he could recall was cramping pleasure followed by feelings of uselessness and despair. Was it the Nazis who had sought a final retribution for the nuisance he had caused them? No, it was more than the evil of Nazism. There was something else there that he found difficult to face.

'The war has finished,' he went on. 'Surely people have learned what it means to turn away from God. Peace is ahead of us. No resentment now. Forgiveness and solidarity must motivate us.' He found himself saying this as much to himself as to his brother – perhaps more so. 'Our fellow Zeelanders will see the wisdom in rebuilding everything, in bringing it back to what it was – to its former glory.' He sighed. It all sounded mechanical. 'Come on, let's go and see Our Blessed Lady's Abbey. Before I set off tomorrow, I want to remind myself again of the history of Catholic Middelburg.'

Frans took him by the arm and they walked slowly towards what was left of a side street on the left-hand corner of the square. As they turned into the dirt and ruins of Lange Burg they glanced to their right along Lange Delft, Middelburg's main shopping street. It was a scene of devastation. They walked silently up the slight incline of Lange Burg, stopping for a moment in front of the blasted shell of the Nieuwe Kerk* and what remained of the great Abbey tower, the Lange Jan.+

'Let's walk down to the Balanspoort,' said Fr van Engelen.

They made their way to one of the ancient passageways that gave access to Abdijplein.** As they emerged on the square, they were met

*New Church +Long John **Abbey Square

with the cruel sight of the ravaged abbey buildings that had been occupied since the Reformation by the provincial government. Directly in front of them on the opposite side of the enclosed square were the ruins of the oldest buildings of the complex: the Abbot's living quarters, his private chapel and the cloisters. They walked across the square and stopped. To their right was a work party stacking and arranging building materials. In quiet conversation, the brothers stood there for some time. At length, they moved to their right past the workers, giving them a greeting as they went. At that moment, a young man pushing a wheelbarrow arrived at the group. He put his wheelbarrow down and looked up just as the brothers were walking by. He went to acknowledge their wave, but noticing the priest's cassock frowned. Fr van Engelen, seeing his reaction, stopped.

'I know this young man,' he said. 'Wait, I want to say hello.' He walked the few paces to where the man was standing. 'Goedemorgen, meneer, I am glad to see that things have worked out for you and your family.'

'Thank you,' the young man said rather stiffly, and barely taking the priest's offered hand, 'but I can't say that yet.'

'No need to be so bleak. You appear to have a job – and I assume accommodation for your family.'

'I do have a job and my wife and child are safe and comfortable...?' He hesitated. 'I knew there was something strange about you. Why didn't you tell us you were a papist priest? What were you up to?'

'Steady on!' cried Frans, hastening to protect his invalid brother.

'It's none of your business...oh, I see, a brother, no doubt.'

'Please, Frans,' said Fr van Engelen, putting a hand on his brother's arm. 'Meneer...what is your name...?'

'Van den Donker.'

'Meneer van den Donker, it was not necessary for me to reveal my name. I was only concerned with the safety of your wife and child. In any case, I had reason not to reveal it. While the Nazis were still around, it was better for the people I was caring for that I kept my identity hidden. I also guessed that your wife belonged to the *Gereformeerde** community. I did not want that to stand in the way of my helping her – and you.'

'*Oud-Gereformeerde*,⁺' corrected the young man. 'I am grateful that the lives of my wife and daughter were saved, but I wish their rescuer had not been an agent of that oppressive papist organization.'

'Have you taken leave of your senses?' exclaimed Frans. 'Do you know what my brother...?'

'Frans, please...'

'My mind is clear enough to recognize evil no matter how it's dressed.'

* *Strict Dutch Reformed* + *Very strict Dutch Reformed*

'You ignorant fool,' said Frans. 'Do you know where you are?'

'As well as you do.'

'These buildings here have been the seat of the Provincial Council since 1574,' said Frans, taking a pace forward. 'The whole complex is called the "Abdij". That should give you a clue what they were, if you've never bothered in your Calvinist arrogance to think about it...'

'Frans...,' Fr Jos appealed again, while the young man assumed an expression of defiance.

'No, Jos, these things need to be said to a person like meneer here,' said Frans, jabbing a finger into the man's breast. 'This was once truly an abbey, established by Norbertine monks in the 12th century. Over the following centuries, a thriving Catholic community grew around the constantly expanding complex of buildings. Was that evil? It all came to an end when the Prince of Orange's troops laid siege to Middelburg.'

'They were traitors. Collaborators – just like the NSB-ers.* They were the tool of the Spanish oppressors.' The young man made it clear it would not tolerate a second jab.

'Oppressors! Who was the oppressor? The first political act of the Prince's supporters when they broke the resistance was to drive all the religious from their property. The monks of Our Blessed Lady's Abbey were driven out with only the clothes they stood in. Theft by violence, that's evil. Whether it's the Nazis doing it or the Prince's troops, the act is called by the same name!'

'Frans, please, it's not necessary...,' Fr van Engelen attempted yet again.

'They were kicked out just like the Nazis have been kicked out,' said the man, speaking over the priest. 'Nazis or papists, the oppressor had to be kicked out.'

'You compare a group of dedicated monks administering a thriving community over three centuries with the Nazis? You are in the pits of the darkest confusion!' shouted Frans. The labourers closest to them looked up.

Fr van Engelen took his brother firmly by the arm and led him away. 'Frans, you will not get anywhere with this sort of talk. That young man and his wife have been through terrible hardship. They've lost their family and their property. Hardly a wonder if his resentments were sharpened. In any case, this is not the way to deal with prejudice towards the Church.'

Frans huffed and then nodded reluctantly. 'Okay. But he got right under my skin...there's something really weird about him.'

'Frans, I appreciate your concern, but please wait near the Balanspoort. I will be with you in a minute.'

**Nazi collaborators*

‘Okay, but be careful. There’s something about that fellow I wouldn’t trust...’ He shuffled off in the direction of the Balanspoort.

As Fr van Engelen slowly walked back, he recalled the young man’s strange reaction when he discovered that his wife and daughter had survived the stampede.

‘Meneer van den Donker, please forgive my brother. He’s very protective of me.’ The young man began emptying his wheelbarrow. ‘The war is over. Now is the time to build on the peace and forget our differences.’

‘The differences between us and you papists can never be ignored.’

‘I meant the differences between us, as people and citizens. Let’s get rid of the animosities that have dogged us since the political events of the 16th century. Forget the actions of fallible men and women. Most people are motivated by goodwill. That’s the basis for fraternal cooperation. We can do this without denying our real differences. I would only want you to change your religious beliefs when you were convinced that you should change them.’

‘The tiger will never lose its stripes,’ said the young man. And then after some reflection, ‘You’re the one who should change.’

The priest looked thoughtfully at him. ‘Do you believe in the Holy Trinity, three persons in one God?’ The young man glanced at the priest. ‘Do you believe that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity became incarnate of the Virgin Mary?’ Still, there was only a brief look from the young man. Fr van Engelen continued to enumerate the key beliefs of the Christian faith. The young man went on working silently, but eventually stopped and stood up straight.

‘I live strictly according to the true meaning of the Scriptures – all the Scriptures, especially those your Church has subverted or ignored.’ He looked scornfully at the priest. ‘What about you in your queer uniform? What about all those black generals who parade as clergy and live in palaces and enjoy a life-style that the poor ordinary Christian can only dream of? Have a look at these buildings. They were once the home of your clergy, your brother said. Not a place for the Zeeland peasant. And what about *Kasteel Zaligheid** up there on the coast? I have looked at that castle all my life. No peasant would have seen the interior of that castle - the summer residence of those same papist priests when they had us under their heel.’

Fr van Engelen’s heart sank. There was no way he could respond adequately to all these objections in a short space of time. And the other labourers were looking resentfully in their direction.

‘It may sound like I am avoiding your accusations, but the answers are too extensive to be stated briefly. I just wanted to say that we share

**Castle of Heavenly Bliss*

the same basic Christian belief. Let's start from that positive point, that point of agreement, and discuss our differences honestly, openly and with goodwill. Perhaps the Holy Spirit will enlighten us.'

The young man let out an ironic laugh and then glancing to the side past the priest suddenly bent down to his work. 'The foreman's coming. Leave me alone if you want me to keep my job.'

Fr van Engelen turned to see a big man in dusty work clothes heading towards them. 'I'm sorry to hold up your worker, meneer foreman,' he called. 'No fault of his. Just inquiring about his family. I'll be off.'

The foreman stopped, grunted unintelligibly and turned back in the direction he had come.

'I wish you and your wife and baby all health and blessings. God bless you,' Fr van Engelen said, and then began to walk away.

'How do I really know you weren't an NSB-er?'

That hurt. It was not that his pastoral activity during the war was being negated; that was done without thought of reward. No, it was that someone could think that he would abandon all notion of right and commit himself to betraying his country and his fellow man. He stopped and turned around.

The priest returned the taunt with an expression of sadness. 'How could you think such a thing?'

The angry young man stood erect, smiled knowingly and then went back to his work. With a heavy heart Fr van Engelen limped slowly to his brother standing just inside the Balanspoort.

'I can see that you didn't make much of an impression on him.'

'Yes, you're right. In fact, I probably confirmed his worst opinions.' He held out his open hands as he contemplated the cobblestones under their feet.

'Jos, don't let it upset you. The man's a bigot. He was clearly that way before the war. I doubt whether his hardships have made it worse. The German army would have trouble penetrating that mentality.'

'No, Frans, we mustn't give up. We must presume that meneer van den Donker wants to do the right thing. You may see him as a bigot, full of impenetrable prejudice, but he is convinced he is right about the Church and its clergy.'

'Hitler was convinced he was right. Not much hope in that quarter.'

'No, Frans, I'm not talking about views that are manifestly evil. We are all capable of recognizing such evil. But in meneer van den Donker's case, we have to admit that there are grounds for his opinion. The behaviour of some prelates right up to the Pope in the Middle Ages was hardly edifying. The trouble is that Cees van den Donker, and those like him, take the small part for the whole. When the clergy fail, it is failure

of momentous proportions. Perhaps the expulsion of the Abbot and his confreres on that day in 1574 was punishment by God for the sins of some of the clergy. We priests bear a grave responsibility.' He took his brother's arm and they walked under the brick archway. 'We cannot, we must not give up, in trying to explain to people like Cees van Donker what the Church is really like – try to separate the human failure from the purity of the faith and the Church committed to guard over it.'

The two brothers walked silently back to Marktplein. Despite the optimistic spirit Fr van Engelen was trying to project, he could not help reflecting on Cees van Donker's strange reaction to him. He could not help trying once again to make sense of those lost days of darkness and despair. And how were that pretty young woman and her baby faring with that man?

Three years later, in May 1949, Fr Jos van Engelen was sitting with his family at a table outside a restaurant on Marktplein. He was enjoying his last day and a cup of coffee with family before setting off for his next assignment. It was a sunny Thursday, market day, and the square was crammed with rows of stalls and a multitude of people walking between them. Many women and men still wearing the traditional costume of their district added colour to the crowd of people milling about and pushing each other as they made their way from stall to stall.

'This is one of the great sights of Middelburg, isn't it? It's like the war never took place,' said Fr van Engelen.

'Take a good look, Jos,' said his father. 'You may not see it for some time.'

'You don't know how right you are, father. But as much as I love the atmosphere of my old town, it's time to get back to my old job. I hope you all won't forget to write.'

'Of course, we won't,' said Marijke, Frans's wife who was holding their baby daughter. 'We will make sure that you regularly get a little Dutch *gezelligheid** through the mail.'

'I will appreciate that, Marijke. Truly. It will keep me going.'

They continued to chat and drink their coffee while watching the many people walking by as they moved from row to row. Fr van Engelen's eyes eventually came to rest on a young woman with a child of about five years struggling along beside her. Suddenly there was a flicker of recognition. 'Excuse me,' he said, getting up, 'I won't be a minute.' Leaving his family staring after him, he walked briskly between the bustling people to the woman who was on the point of entering one of the rows.

'Mevrouw van den Donker!'

She swung around, putting her hand to her mouth. 'Oh, meneer, I

**Coziness, companionable, pleasant - an often used untranslatable Dutch word*

mean Father, it's really you.' She moved out of the way of the people, pulling the little girl with her.

'Yes, it's really me,' he said, with a smile.

'I...I hoped I would come across you some day.' She shifted, embarrassed. 'Cees told me he had seen you and your brother in the Abdij. I wasn't surprised to hear you were a priest...your manner, you know. That was more than three years ago...you were sent elsewhere...?'

'Yes.'

There was a nervous pause.

'You certainly look better than the last time I saw you, though still thin.'

'Thank you, mevrouw,' he smiled again, and then turning to the little girl: 'Hello Gerda, are you enjoying market day?' The little girl scarcely glanced at him. 'Yes, I have been in Brabant,' he went on. 'I am back here for a few days to spend with my family. Tomorrow I set off for New Guinea. That's where I was up until shortly before the outbreak of the war when I came home for a visit. The war kept me in Holland.'

'That was my good fortune.'

'Providence works in strange ways.'

She nodded and was silent for a moment. She rubbed the head of her daughter leaning timidly against her.

'Yes, Providence does act in strange ways. Not only did you pluck me and my baby from death that day but you provided us with hope – at least me. We were desperate. I am sure you guessed that. Little did I realize that a man dressed as a beggar would come to our aid. Do you want to know how...do you have time?'

'Of course, mevrouw.'

'Well, after much urging, I prevailed upon my husband to return to Walcheren. He refused to go to the address in Amsterdam. So we made our way by ourselves to Middelburg. It was very difficult going and we were exhausted by the time we arrived.

'Pastor Hendrikse provided us with food and accommodation. Work came immediately. You know, the bombed dykes had to be repaired urgently. Cees worked on the dykes until he was able to get labouring work at the Abdij. It was not as backbreaking, he said. When we were a little settled, he set about finding out what happened to the family property. You may guess what resulted from Cees's single-mindedness. The shocking tragedy of having the whole family wiped out meant that all their property came to us, from both sides of the family. We actually inherited quite a lot – property and money.' She looked sadly at the priest. 'We are quite well off now. Terrible, isn't it?'

'It is sad, but I am glad to hear that you are materially comfortable.'

‘Yes, we are materially comfortable. In other ways, it’s just like we remained in the war.’ Her eyes filled. ‘You must excuse my husband, meneer, I mean Father...’ She quickly brushed an encroaching tear from the corner of one eye.

‘Please, you don’t have to call me Father. Whatever you are comfortable with.’

‘Thank you, meneer. Please understand. Cees was already an intense, sombre person before the war. The war only made it worse. He became very bitter about the destitute circumstances we ended up in. Perhaps we should have stayed in Zeeland. We have heard there was enough food here to prevent people from starving. But Cees thought the Germans would force him to work in their factories. Anyhow, there we were in Amsterdam, struggling to survive.

‘Actually, we weren’t even married when we fled the Germans. Of course, we had always intended to marry, but at the time our parents thought we were too young. We got married as soon as we could because...you know. Then I fell pregnant. Instead of making Cees happy, he became even darker and more bitter about the world. Why did we have to bring a child into all that misery, he exclaimed? There was nothing I could do or say to appease him. That day on the Dam he had arranged to meet someone about work. The poor man was trampled to death. Cees already knew that when he found me. It only increased his bitterness. I am so sorry about the way he acted towards you.’ She put her hand on his arm, but then withdrew it quickly. ‘His mood was even darker after that. His anger...I thought he was going to burst. Then he left me for a short while that morning, not long after you...and I don’t know why. I sat with my daughter alone on the steps of a house in the Warmoestraat thinking...but he was better later...’ She shrugged her shoulders. ‘I always wanted to thank you again. Now I have the chance to do so. Thank you for saving our lives. I will never forget it.’

‘I was only doing what every human being should do in the circumstances.’ He gazed at her still fresh young face with the smooth rounded cheeks, the clear eyes and her hair tied back. ‘Is Cees really not at all improved in spirits?’ Surely this compassionate pretty young woman, dressed modestly and evidently conscious of her duties, was all that a man could wish for in a wife?

‘I’m afraid not,’ she said, looking down at her daughter and brushing her hair. ‘In some ways it is worse. It has become very political. He associates all the ills of his life with people of authority and he associates all authority with the Nazis. I just don’t understand it. We are well off. Cees is a hard worker and it wasn’t long before the farms were making good profits. With those profits, he was able to buy into other

businesses. They are all doing well. And still he is as bitter and obsessive as he was when the war ended.'

'Doesn't your faith make it easier for him?'

'No, he has so twisted it that it really supports him in his views. I really don't understand it. It's like there's something else there...and I can't do anything about it...he gets...' She shrugged her shoulders in a hopeless manner. 'Anyhow, I suppose I must move on now. I have to meet Cees later. And we are standing in the way here, you know.' A nervous smile brightened her face for an instant. 'Thank you, Fr van Engelen. You see, I know your name now,' and then as if another thought came into her head, 'I won't forget that we prayed together, either. It is all the more strange considering that you are a priest of Rome.'

'I will keep you in my prayers,' he said, as she moved off leading the little girl by the hand. 'Goodbye, Gerda,' he called, but there was no reaction. He watched them disappear into the bustling crowd and then walked back to his family who looked at him questioningly. He sat down wearily and said nothing for a while.

'Frans, do you know who that was?' he said, at last.

'Should I know?'

'That's the wife of meneer van den Donker.'

'Oh, yes, of course, that furious fellow from the Abbey. You know, he has really fallen on his feet – gone from a labourer to a well-to-do farmer and business proprietor. They live just outside Vrouwekerke. He will end up a big boy in this part of the world, if I'm not mistaken.'

'She told me that they had inherited a lot of money and property from family killed during the war.'

'Well, he's putting it to good use. And it's likely that I, as a notary, will eventually have something to do with him.'

'Oh, that's so sad,' said his mother. 'That money will remind them for the rest of their lives how it came to them.'

'The effects of the war will be felt a long time to come,' his father observed. 'I hope that young man learns how to deal with it for the sake of his family.'

'I do, too, Pappa,' said the priest vaguely, but he felt despondent about their chances.

That evening during the family farewell he could not help thinking about Cees van den Donker and his wife. In the train the next day on the way to Rotterdam harbor, he still had them on his mind, especially the sad appealing expression on the fresh youthful face of mevrouw van den Donker. He felt a nagging despondency about her. No, he told himself, he must shake it off. He must maintain some hope as he encouraged

others to do. But dark indistinct visions mingled with the effort to remain optimistic. It wasn't until he was established back in New Guinea not far from the coastal town of Lae, and bearing the full load of his work, that his mind was released from thinking about Cees van den Donker, his pining wife and passive little daughter.