

Discovering My Great-Grandfather's Legacy

By Esther Aardsma

How had I missed this?

As I read through my grandfather's short memoir which he had written for his family, with tears and yet a soaring sense of pride, the realization dawned on me that this man he wrote of, his father, *my* great-grandfather, was a war hero. How had I not heard of this, *my* legacy, until now?

My great-grandfather Simon Tuinstra, his wife Geesje, and their six children lived in the town of Heerenveen in the province of Friesland in the Netherlands. Simon was a bookkeeper at a lard-smelting factory.

On May 10, 1940, the Nazi Germans invaded the Netherlands. They occupied schools and the best homes. Bicycles, vehicles, and radios were confiscated, and the citizens' freedom to travel was severely limited.

Simon quietly joined the Dutch Underground Resistance. His wife knew, but even his own children did not know until near the end of the war. His children knew that their dad kept a radio hidden in the baby buggy or the coal bin, and that he would tune into the BBC radio station to write down nonsense sentences he heard. Simon's children only later realized that those were codes to be passed along to the Underground as instructions for the Resistance. The contraband radio would not work without carefully removing a German seal from the house's main fuse box and temporarily installing a backup fuse to provide electricity to the house, as the Germans had taken their main fuse and sealed the fuse box to prevent the home from receiving power. Owning the radio carried grave risks; every day Simon and Geesje reminded their children not to tell anyone anything about the radio. The children were warned not to tell anyone what the family talked about together, or where family members might go, or who their friends were.

Because Simon was bound by silence at the time in order to protect the Underground fighters as well as his own family, and probably later because of the pain of the memories, little is known about Simon's activities in the Underground Resistance. He had to carry on as apparently normal a life as he could while engaging in the fight against the Germans under cover. Perhaps he and his direct

comrades assisted downed Allied pilots or Jews in escaping the country, or perhaps they helped to falsify documents or obtain food for people in hiding. He was probably involved with damaging railroad tracks, effectively sabotaging the Germans' supply routes out of the farm country of Friesland.

My grandfather wrote that in what became the final two weeks of the war, Simon "slipped out of the house after dark, warning us again not to talk to anyone, and...actively [engaged] the Germans in open warfare. The Canadian troops...[trapped] the Germans in Friesland...attacked in front by the allied Canadian forces, and in the back by the Underground."

My great-grandmother Geesje and her children knew nothing of Simon for those next two weeks. On April 15, 1945, a day after Liberation Day, word had filtered back to Heerenveen that several local men had lost their lives in the fighting, and some of his Underground group had made it back, but Simon still hadn't. Though the family kept a brave face, they were very worried. Then, finally, "what an explosive, exuberant, joyful feeling it was when Dad finally entered the street where we lived, late in the afternoon, on his bike, with a rifle slung over his shoulder. How proud we all were to know that he was one of the local heroes of the Resistance...The rifle my Dad carried was the one with which he killed a young German soldier boy in defense of the farm which his platoon occupied...Dad said he would only tell [the story of killing the boy] once."

Simon's platoon had headquartered on a farm. The night before they met battle, they sang around a pump organ together. One of the hymns (translated) was "Come, let us go on children, Because the evening is near. To stand still can only mean trouble in this wilderness. Come, strengthen anew your courage! Lift high the walking staff to strive toward heaven, in this way the end will be good."

The next day saw their first open battle with a German platoon. One of the Germans raised a white flag and one of Simon's friends, a schoolteacher named Sieger van der Laan, jumped up and told them in German to drop their weapons and come out with their hands up. Sieger had barely finished speaking before he was shot and killed instantly from another direction.

Another Underground platoon, several farms further down, was unfortunately surprised by the Germans. These Germans captured another of Simon's friends, "tortured him beyond recognition and hung him from a tree branch on the farm."

In a later skirmish, a German platoon sprayed the farm with machine gun fire. Simon was positioned by a small window in the attic, providing covering fire to keep the Germans pinned, and ducked down below the sill to avoid the gunfire. The shots went over his head; the Germans had aimed too high. If they had aimed below the windowsill, he would not have survived. The Germans suddenly rushed the farm; one soldier, a boy Simon estimated was 15 or 16, ran straight down the path into the line of Simon's rifle fire and killed instantly. The Resistance platoon, using a superior knowledge of the terrain, were able to surround the German soldiers and force them to surrender.

"I am sure," my grandfather wrote, "the German soldiers thought that these 'rebels' would line them up and execute them. They did not realize, however, that this group of Underground freedom fighters were God-fearing men, husbands and fathers, to whom killing another unarmed human being was unthinkable."

Regarding the boy he had killed, "he compared the German soldier with me [my grandfather, Willem] and how a flood of grief had overwhelmed him when he had killed a human being, a boy my age."

When Simon returned, there was celebrating—and mourning, for the friends he'd lost. "Not in the history of my hometown has there been or will there be a greater outpouring of sympathy and participation in a funeral procession than the one for Sieger van der Laan," my grandfather wrote. Simon spoke at the funeral and asked the congregation to sing the same hymn that their Resistance platoon had sung the night before van der Laan's death. There is still a street in Heerenveen today, Sieger van der Laanstraat, named after the schoolteacher turned militia hero.

How had I not known these stories? I wish I could rewind twenty years and tell my young ears to listen better, to care more about the stories I heard...but I'm not even sure if they were being told. I'm infinitely glad that I have my grandfather's journal, because the legacy he hands down from his father is powerful—one of courage and strength, even through terror. One of humanity and respect, even in

the face of beastliness. He could have turned a blind eye and said *someone else can do it*—but he didn't. Simon Tuinstra's is a legacy I am fiercely proud of.

Write
with

Esther

A pen nib is shown at the end of a decorative flourish that extends from the word 'Esther'. The flourish is a long, wavy line that curves back under the word.