

**MEMORIES
OF MY FATHER**

HIS LIFE STORY
AGAINST ALL ODDS

TERRY VAN VREDEN

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*In memoriam my loving parents
Always in my heart and mind*

My wife

*My sons
Jayden & Justin
Dad loves you*

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Foreword

It was in August 1972 that I met Bert van Vreden for the first time. My wife Willy and I had just arrived in Indonesia where I was to work on an irrigation project for PT Decorient Indonesia. We were introduced to the people working in the Jakarta head office at Jalan Raden Saleh. It was there where we met Bert for the first time. He immediately invited us for lunch and drinks at his house at Jalan Surabaya in Menteng. Once there, and seeing Bert's DAF in racing trim converted to a kind of "speedster" with the top removed, we soon discovered our mutual interest and started to participate in motor racing events. That was the start of a friendship which lasted till his sad passing.

Over all those years Willy and I have come to know Bert as a very hospitable and helpful person. At the house at Jalan Surabaya, it was often a coming and going of friends, racing enthusiasts and people needing some "how to" advice. The backyard was the workshop where we worked on our racing cars during the try-out weekends held at the Ancol race track. Often Bert surprised me with his down to earth hands-on mentality, not only in our hobby, but also very much so in his work. For example, when it turned out that we did not yet have a local driver, with a suitable license, for our big trailer, to transport the construction equipment from Tanjung Priok to the job site, Bert did not hesitate and took the wheel himself. A trip of about five to six hours over bad roads and some times horrific traffic. And not one trip, it took some eight trips to get everything on-site. And that is only one example.

Always looking at the bright side, in for a good joke and creator of striking texts which pitiful enough are untranslatable. All this and the above is how we remember Bert van Vreden. In this book, his youngest son Therry has described his own memories in relation to his father's life.

— *Willy & Frank Bruijn were longtime friends of Bert van Vreden. Frank was also a colleague and fellow racing driver in Indonesia Rotterdam, Netherlands, April 2019*

Van Vreden is one of the legendary names in Indonesian motorsport, especially in the Sirkuit Ancol era. Most people thought he was the only "buleh" racing driver when there were actually others in the sport as well. However, the crowd was always anxiously anticipating for van Vreden to perform his magic. I wonder whether it was simply just the man or machine — or perhaps a combination of both — regardless he would often steal the show. It didn't matter where he would finish on the podium as he would always win the first prize for best actor.

The 1970's and 1980's were the golden era for Indonesian motorsports with a great batch of talented drivers emerging. One of them was my own father Aswin Bahar who was a close friend of van Vreden. He definitely passed on the racing fever to myself as well as my son Avila. I vividly remember, when I was a kid, coming to Ancol for Sunday practice, Van Vreden would always be there. He would have his striking Honda S800 or Formula Atlantic cars and you would be automatically drawn to his appearance and charm.

After so many years, I was very pleased to be contacted by his son

Therry, who I remember from those practice sessions sitting on his father's lap whilst going around the race track. It is a great honor for him to write this book about his father with the many memories he has about him as well as those who knew him throughout his life.

This is a great book about a great man written by his own son.

— *Alvin Bahar is the son of racing legend Aswin Bahar. Alvin is a professional racing driver in Indonesia for Team Honda together with his son Avila.*

Jakarta, Indonesia, April 2019

Introduction

There were many questions I wanted to ask my father when he was still alive. There were still so many stories I wanted to hear from him. But time was not on his side. Many people have asked me why I had decided to write a book about my father? What was my motivation? What inspired me?

For most young boys, your father is a greater than life figure. Someone you look up against, admire and don't want to let down. As you then go through adolescence, that turns into resistance and detachment as you are soul searching to find your own identity. Most only begin to realise later how much their father has always been their role model. The person that was there for them to guide them during their life journey and who you most resemble — though you do not want to admit that. And for those lucky ones, you have had the chance to say that to your father and share those moments together before it is too late.

My father's journey through life has become the motivation and drive that has fueled and still fuels my everyday life. Perseverance, self-belief, being honest, staying close to yourself and never give up hope typified his character. Born before the second world war, he comes from a generation that had lost everything. Opportunities were taken away and those that would persevere had to find and learn it the hard way. Without any education, he took it upon himself to not let this limit his chances in the world. A world that was rebuilding after the war. A world with unknown cold war tensions and various colonies across the world finding their identity after independence.

These were uncertain times during which extraordinary people were required to bring structure and built up those nations.

His journey will take you through Turkey, former Dutch Nieuw-Guinea and eventually the country where my father spent more than twenty-five years of his life — the world’s largest archipelago — Indonesia. It will give you insights how everyday life was in those early years and the challenges that came with it. For me the past two years has been a fantastic journey through time. I have met so many interesting people who have willingly contributed to this book, for which I am truly grateful. It has been an enlightenment to have gotten to know my father all over again. To have had this opportunity to share these wonderful stories with you — my readers. The same stories my father shared with me, so they won’t be forgotten.

PART ONE

THE BEGINNING

Chapter One

Facing Reality

2012

“Every man’s life ends the same way. It is only the details of how he lived and how he died that distinguish one man from another”

— Ernest Miller Hemingway, an American journalist, novelist, and short-story writer

It was a warm Monday morning, on the 23rd of July 2012, when I was awakened abruptly by bright flashlights shining through my window. I was living in Gouda at the time, one of the traditional ‘*vestingsteden*’ — fortified cities — in the Netherlands, dating back to the Middle Ages. Most people know the city for its cheese, stroopwafels, ‘*grachten*’ (canals) and its 15th-century city hall.

The house I lived in was in the suburbs on the outskirts of the city where mostly families reside. This to get away from the hustle and bustle of downtown and the major cities that surround Gouda, such as Rotterdam & The Hague (Den Haag). I had a decent relationship with my neighbours but mostly I was a loner focused on my work, hobbies and my kids who would visit me every fortnight. I remember there was an older woman living next door who seemed to have an unique

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gift of picking up every little noise I made. She would then embark on making that known as and when she felt it exceeded, the to her tolerated, decibel levels for this quite suburb. But apart from that there would not be much excitement, let alone any noise or sounds early in the mornings.

But this morning it felt different, I felt restless, twisting and turning in my sleep. It might have been the heat of the Summer, that had reached Northern Europe, or the excitement of my upcoming business trip to Spain the next day. My work as a Sales Manager would take me across Europe and most parts of the World every other week. The flashing lights ensured I rose out of bed and immediately checked the time — did I overslept for my flight, what was going on? — I put on some clothes and rushed to the front door where I found two police officers standing in the doorway.

“Therry van Vreden?”, the officer asked.

“Yes — How can I help you officers? What has happened?”

“You need to urgently call your brother as there has been an emergency with your father”.

I froze, I felt like someone had stabbed me right through the heart. A sharp pain went through my body whilst immediate thoughts of the worst possible scenario’s flashed through my mind. Seconds felt like hours. It might have been a combination of being stunned as well as being half awake at that insane time in the morning.

“Did you hear us, Sir?— Did you understand what we said?”, the officers checked.

“Uh uh uh Yes yes, thank you officer”.

The door slammed shut and there I stood in the hallway, barely dressed, with emotions and thoughts running wild. Life never prepares you for this but the first thoughts that ran through my mind were — “is this it? Is this the moment my father will leave me?”

It had been nine years since my mother unfortunately passed away due to her illness. This had left my father heartbroken as it was never meant for her to pass away before him. There was a twenty year age gap between my parents. Also, for me that loss was devastating. My father and I confided a lot in and gave support to each other in the years since to handle the grief. My father had become a true friend and the one person I could always depend on in my life. As he exceeded the age of eighty years, I knew every single day, having him around, would be a blessing and that father time was upon him. But being faced with that inevitable possibility completely ripped my world apart.

I rushed back upstairs to check my phone and found a barrage of missed calls from my brother. I have three half-brothers from my father's first marriage who live around sixty kilometres north in small rural villages called Bussum and Huizen, near the capital of Amsterdam. Bussum was also my father's hometown and the place where I went to Secondary school.

I immediately dialed the last missed call which was from my eldest brother Bert (Lambertus), named after my father and his great grandfather, as per the tradition in old Dutch times. The voice that echoed on the other end was that of a stranger. My vary thoughts went in different directions trying to understand what to expect.

"You must be Therry, Bert van Vreden's youngest son. Your brother has been trying to contact you throughout the night."

"Have a seat — I'm the doctor in charge — your father has been admitted to hospital and is in a very bad shape. During the time we were preparing for an emergency operation, he collapsed again and we decided not to pursue it further", the doctor informed me.

"I understand you are about forty-five minutes away; do not rush, drive safely as we expect you will not be able to reach here in time".

That was all. The line got cut off, and I plunged down on the edge of my bed. Birds started to chirp as morning broke and tears started to

roll down my cheeks as reality began to sink in. My beloved soul mate, guardian and friend had left us.

I urgently gathered my stuff and climbed into my car to make the journey to Bussum and confront the expected news. During the journey, memories started to flood my mind and tears started to slowly make way for content as it being very happy memories. At the same time, immediate regret occurred as I had so many questions still to ask my father. He was always such a vivid story teller which all came from the many experiences he had gained throughout his long and exciting life.

At the time of his death, my father just turned a respectable eighty-two-years old. Luckily we celebrated his last birthday with the whole family. He never was a person who wanted to be the centre of attention. But this time around, he truly absorbed the blessings of having everyone with him. As if he knew this could well be the last time. I also felt it and can clearly remember, before going home, giving him a bear hug and saying — “I love you dad”. Words that were really scarce in our household. Not because we didn’t love each other, the complete opposite, but showing affection was not one of those things we expressed. I can still picture my dad, when I was twelve-years old — and wanting to kiss my dad *‘welterusten’* (goodnight). “Real men don’t kiss each other”, he said. And that was that. From than onwards it was a mere verbal goodnight and the occasional hug later on.

Although I knew my dad well there was also a lot I didn’t know about him. The last few years his short-term memory would let him down — a result of two tia’s (strokes) in the last ten years. However, his long-term memory, fortunately, never got affected. It even seemed this became even more vivid as he kept telling the same old stories over and over again.

About an hour after that phone call, I arrived at the hospital to be immediately hugged by my eldest brother.

“He is dead, he is dead!”, he screamed.

Although I prepared myself mentally for that message, it still hit me like someone would pull a carpet underneath you and falling to the cold stone floor collapsing in a bath of tears. Whilst walking into the hospital my other two brothers surrounded us and we created the largest family hug we ever gave each other. As I stood there, I caught a glimmer of my dad in the left corner of my eye. It must have been less than a second and I remember I turned away immediately. I could never stand seeing dead people, still can't, and prefer to remember those deceased loved ones for who they once were. But as I glanced I remembered the room, it was *deja-vu*. It was the exact same room where I also saw my dad ten years earlier. The memory intensified my feeling of being lost, that feeling of loneliness, being helpless and screaming to my dad.

“Don't leave me, I still need you. You can't go dad!”.

It was in the Spring of 2002 and I was standing beside his hospital bed in that exact same room at the ER. He had just been brought in after having suffered, what would be known later, one of many *tia*'s. A TIA is a transient ischaemic attack, a temporary hiatus of blood flow in the brain. With a TIA, the blood supply to a part of the brain is temporarily disrupted. As a result, the brain temporarily receives less oxygen, and this causes the loss of certain body functions. Although my dad had lost part of his mobility functions and speech, his eyes and body language were still strong and determined. He firmly held my hand and with that confirmed he would go nowhere. He would give me the signal he would still protect me and be there for me on this journey of life.

I abruptly snapped back to reality and gasped for air.

“He has really left me now. Daddddd, I still need you!”.

But this time, his body had given up on him. Although his mind and will would like to go on. His body had to pay the toll for the hard life he has had.

During the next few days, my eldest brother took the lead and responsibility to prepare for the funeral when he shared with me:

“Therry, dad explicitly asked for you to prepare a speech, on behalf of the family, and present that during the funeral.

“Will you do that?”, he asked.

“Off course — I immediately said”, without any hesitation.

Nine years earlier my mother passed away after a long sick bed and I guess dad was touched by the words I said during her funeral.

I was at 10,000 feet flying back from Barcelona to Amsterdam when I took out my iPad and started to prepare for this. Where do you start? What do you say? Who was my father?

What will people remember him by? What do you want people to remember him for? As I wildly started to type I realised the extraordinary, unique but also difficult life he has had. The struggles he has had to face and what he has achieved with the limited possibilities. He always had a no-nonsense attitude to persevere and make something off yourself against all odds. Hate the naysayers and only believe in yourself, do not look back, only forward — how difficult it may seem.

It dawned on me that this story has to be told, has to be shared as there are hidden life lessons we can all learn from and take away to benefit our own choices.

It was at that very moment that I decided I must make this happen one day. His dreams, believes and strength are the underlying reason for writing this book. For capturing his unbelievable life story and describing the man I proudly call *'Dad'*.

Chapter Two

Origins

1930 - 1945

“We do not have to be ashamed of what we are. As sentient beings we have wonderful backgrounds. These backgrounds may not be particularly enlightened or peaceful or intelligent. Nevertheless, we have soil good enough to cultivate; we can plant anything in it”

— Chögyam Trungpa, a Buddhist meditation master and holder of both the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages, the eleventh Trungpa tülku, a tertön, supreme abbot of the Surmang monasteries, scholar, teacher, poet, artist, and originator of a radical re-presentation of Shambhala vision

The distinctive sound of jazz music was playing in the background. Characterised by its tone colours, performance techniques, and dotted syncopated rhythmic patterns. Right in front of us the lights of the cars flashing by the iconic ‘*Bunderan HI*’ (Hotel Indonesia roundabout) with its iconic ‘*Selamat Datang Monument*’ (welcome monument). Completed in 1962, it was ordered to be constructed by than President Sukarno as part of several city beautification projects in preparation for the Asian Games IV. To our right stands the once famous Hotel Indonesia (HI), now Hotel

Indonesia Kempinsky. The first five-star hotel in Jakarta, similarly constructed in preparation for the same Asian Games, alongside the Jalan Thamrin. As a child I have fond memories of going to Hotel HI with my parents. Every Saturday evening, grooming our hairs and afterwards grabbing a drink in the lobby bar enjoying the sounds of live musicians. And to our left, the famous building Wisma Nusantara still shines bright as a tall beacon protecting the Jakarta skyline. The building was constructed in 1964 and considered to be the first-ever high-rise in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

My dad and I were back in his and our beloved country of Indonesia. The country where he would eventually live and work for more than thirty years. The country where he would meet his loving wife. The country where I would be born. The country that was always closest to his heart. He had not been back for seventeen years. Although physically a lot had changed, underneath the hustle & bustle, the tropical sentiment of the land was very much still alive. We just landed in Jakarta as part of our three-week holiday. It would bring us past old places but also re-discover the beautiful history and landscape that beholds our beloved Indonesia. During this first night back, holding his typical whiskey 7Up in his hand, listening to the rhythm of his beloved jazz music, he was seemingly at peace. Although missing his beloved wife on his side, he started to relax and loosen up, clearly enjoying being back where it all started. It was as if he forgot who was around him as he started to wonder off.

“WAR DECLARED....WAR DECLARED”

He remembered coming home from school one day. His parents intensely listening to the radio and being very nervous. He asked what was going on. Whilst holding her finger against her lips, his mother said that the war had broken out. He was nine years old. That night the radio still announced to just go to bed because the Germans were still far away. In the middle of that 10th May 1940 night they were

brutally awakened by the rumble of hundreds of German planes. The Dutch queen announced on the radio that unfortunately the invasion had begun. His childhood was abruptly interrupted as Germany had commenced operation Fall Gelb and attacked the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Luxembourg, without a declaration of war given. The impact of the German occupation was immediately felt in day-to-day life as many Dutch companies and municipalities capitulated to the German oppression. They chose to collaborate with the Germans instead of resisting them and risking their lives. The Germans also implemented '*Arbeidseinsatz*' which was the term used for forced involvement in the German war economy of workers from the occupied territories during the Second World War. Every male between eighteen and forty-five years of age was obligated to work in the many factories in Germany. It was believed that between 1938 - 1945, around 7.7 million male workers of non-German origin were deployed in the German war economy. In the German '*Rüstungsindustrie*' (Weapon industry), it was even found that half of the workers were '*Fremdarbeiter*' (foreign worker). His dad (my grandfather) was expected to report himself as well but made the conscious decision to go into hiding.

The family lived in the small town of Bussum in Noord-Holland, The Netherlands. Here my father, Lambertus (named after his father and his grandfather) was born on a sizzling hot Tuesday on the 15th of July 1930. His dad worked as a gardener for the Municipality and his mom was a beloved housewife taking care of the four children. He was the eldest of four. He had two more sisters and a much younger brother who only arrived when he was far in his teens. Being the eldest child, he was expected to follow in his father's footsteps and take care of the family from an early age. The family had a modest living in one of the workers neighbourhoods of the town. My father did not enjoy a lot of luxury. Everybody was living under the same conditions and therefore he did not know any different. He had a

'normal' childhood which was typified by a lot of hard work to help your parents in and around the house which was very common in those years. Whether it would be running errands, cleaning the house, garden or helping dad with some of the labour-intensive jobs.

The family lived at the Dr. Abraham Kuyperlaan (named after the Prime Minister of The Netherlands between 1901 and 1905) in Bussum which was in the Southern part of town. It was one of the main streets in town consisting out of pebbles where the crackling of each footstep or vehicle could be easily heard from faraway. The streets were very dark, a direct result of the compulsory blackout measures the Germans put in place during the Second World War. The purpose of these eclipse measures was to prevent Allied bombers from finding their way to Germany or dropping material. The story goes that my grandfather was hidden in the small basement of the house. Only twice a day, he would be provided with whatever food & drinks the family could scrape together which was fast becoming very scarce. Since 1939, most food articles were only available through a provided '*Distributie-stamkaart*' (food stamp card). It was forbidden to exchange these cards with others. Another reason the Germans introduced these cards was to cut off the thousands of people in hiding, like my Grandfather.

"Bread, textile and shoes were all on food stamps", my father recalled.

"I had to wait in queues for hours after school with those damn stamps. Vegetables and potatoes were not on stamps in the first years and a large black market appeared. But the '*moffen*' (krauts) ended that and then we were back in queue for a darn grove of leek and a kilogram of potatoes for each ten cents. In the meantime, we would go scouring past farmers to exchange what goods we had for flour, cheese, milk and grains. The bakers' cart wasn't save anymore either; his head would just be bashed in and his bread stolen. Those '*moffen*' obviously also got hungry and if they saw you had bread or cheese,

than they would immediately take that away from you. Luckily, they left children alone, so I was sent out for food most of the times”.

At the same time, another serious conflict was brewing in the country that would play such a major part in Dad’s life fifteen years later. After the Dutch capitulated to the Germans, the Dutch East Indies immediately joined the Allies and all German & Japanese citizens, spies or not, were interned. Japan was becoming an increasing danger after its occupation of Northern Indochina, and together with the United States, the Dutch East Indies announced an oil boycott against Japan in July 1941. As Japan had no own oil resources, it only produced ten percent of its requirements through oil shale in Manchuria, it was heavily depended on imports from the United States (93%) and other areas such as the Dutch East Indies. As their desperation grew, drastic decisions were made and after the attack on Pearl Harbour on 7th December 1941, the Netherlands declared war with all overseas territories of Japan. All along the Japanese had already decided that the Dutch East Indies were to be a major target because of its vast reserves of oil. And on the 17th of December, Japan duly attacked the colony. The Allies tried to set up a front ABCD (America, Britain, China, Dutch East Indies), but after Hong Kong, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore fell to Japan. The Japanese landed on the main island Java and Dutch troops surrendered on the 8th of March 1942.

“Aufmachen und schnell — aufmachen”

Dawn just broke when the family got abruptly interrupted by loud banging on the heavy wooden front door. These were clearly German voices and surely no friendly ones. My dad, being the eldest, opened the door and before he could say a word, three German soldiers pushed the door in his face and marched inside the house.

“Wo ist er?” (where is he?), they started yelling.

How did they know my grandfather was hiding? Was it because he

had not reported himself to work at the municipality for sometime? Or did someone betray him? Everyone remained silent, probably more stunned and frightened than deliberately being uncooperative and not answering the questions the soldiers asked.

“Zum letzten Mal wo ist er?” (for the last time, where is he?)

As the soldiers stared down the startled eyes of the family, they noticed a glint on the floor in the hallway which was reflected due to the limited light still shining in the kitchen. The glint was unfortunately the handle that would directly lead to the basement opening where my grandfather was hiding. The soldier nearest quickly grabbed the handle and with a couple of hard pulls, the hatch unveiled the basement and my heavily starved grandfather. He was pulled up by the clearly visible collarbones which were exposed due to being malnourished. Being resistant would do him no good, he was unfortunately exposed and caught. The terrible stories of the German camps were widespread. As he was taken away a last look over his shoulder caught the glimpse of his family looking at him in tears. Surely this would be the last time they would see him again, dead or alive. So, few men ever escaped the notorious voyage to the camps, let only being there. His only chance would be to master a plan to escape during the truck ride to the camp, but how long did he have?

He was loaded onto an Opel Blitz where he found about twenty other men had been ruffled up from nearby houses. He recognised some of them; those he had not seen for months. Each and every one of them having the look in their eyes of despair, fear but foremost relinquished to their soon to be unfortunate destiny. But my grandfather was having none of it. He had too much to live for and was definitely not going to leave this world in the hands of the enemy. He overheard the soldiers in the driver's seat mentioning 'Westerbork' — a refugee, detention and transit camp in the North of The Netherlands in the province of Drenthe. Originally erected by the Dutch Government in 1939 to shelter Jewish refugees from Germany was

now transformed into a transit camp by the Germans from where an estimated 101,000 Dutch Jews and about 5,000 German Jews were deported to their deaths in Occupied Poland. Almost every Tuesday a cargo train left for the concentration camps Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibór, Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt. Even Anne Frank transited through Westerbork before she was taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau on one of the last three trains in 1944. Grandpa most likely would have been sent to work at the camp instead of being transited to a concentration camp as he was neither Jewish or a gypsy.

Westerbork was at least 150 kilometres on these bad roads which would mean there would be escape opportunities when the truck would have to stop for either refueling or drink/sanitary stops. One of those breaks happened in the wooded area around Nunspeet, in the province of Overijssel. An area my grandfather knew well. He had spend a lot of time as a teenager with family who lived in the places Epe & Wapenveld, which were only sixteen and thirty kilometres away from Nunspeet respectively. It was already dark and the truck stopped on the exterior of what was a heavily wooded forest with its trees bearing the multi-coloured leaves of what was common for The Netherlands in Autumn.

“Entschuldigung, aber kann ich bitte urinieren?” (Excuse me, can I take a pee please?), my grandfather asked one of the German guards.

“Was? (What) — Du hast 30 sekunden!” (You have 30 seconds)”.

He noticed that no soldier accompanied him as he walked to the edge of the forest to find a suitable tree to piss against. This was his one and only opportunity. This was the moment he had waited for. As the vapour of his warm pee evaporated from the cold leaves and tree, he took one quick look over his shoulders to see whether any soldiers were watching him. During the time he zipped up, everything afterwards happened in slow-motion. The German soldier that was supposed to stand guard, whilst my grandfather took his urinary break, took a smoke break. It must have been a combination of the

Autumn evening moist in the air and the darkness that had set but it seemed an eternity for the soldier to light his cigarette. In this split second my grandfather made a rather impulsive, either brave or stupid decision, to quietly slip into the woods. You have to imagine that in those days no roads had any lights and any lights that were around would immediately be dimmed at night to avoid attracting any unwanted attention from the *'wehrmacht'* or *'luftwaffe'* patrolling. Luckily the leaves on the ground were slightly wet from the recent rainfall, which is very common in Autumn, hence that his footsteps would not be heard when he slipped away in the night.

It must have been no more than ten seconds till the German soldier turned around and realised the cock-up he had committed..

"Achtung, Achtung, ein Gefangener ist entkommen" (Alarm, Alarm a prisoner has escaped), he shouted.

Immediately two additional soldiers rushed to the scene and quickly began to move in the direction of where my grandfather was last seen.

There were not many directions for him to go into. The soldiers took the most ambitious decision to move inward into the woods away from the road in a chaotic search for my grandfather. As soon as my grandfather heard the loud cries and footsteps of the soldiers he instinctively began to hide himself like he had done so many times as a child growing up in these areas playing hide and seek with his friends and family. This area was covered by birch and bark trees of which the latter has a grayish dark camouflage-like fabric making it ideal to hide in. Autumn had triggered the trees to lose their leaves in earnest creating huge piles of its dark brown coloured texture across the forest. The trick, he knew, was to go for the pile that was closest to the trunk of the tree as it resembled the same colour which would blend in with the surrounding area, especially at night. He knew outrunning these soldiers would not be a wise strategy and therefore he immediately dug himself into a pile of brown leaves and folded

himself into the smallest ball his body would allow him to be. He could hear the soldiers nearing as they slowed down and began to canvass the area. Their talking made way for silence as they poked their guns into various piles of leaves around the area. Their jackboots would make the sobbing sound when making their way through the small ponds pooling around various ditches in the forest. It felt an eternity but could not have been more than a couple of minutes.

“Verlasse den Gefangenen, lass uns gehen” (leave the prisoner, let’s go), the commander said to the other soldier.

My grandfather waited till he could hear the truck leave in the distance before quietly making his way out of the pile of leaves. It would be a trick to mislead him into thinking they had actually left. But he had to take a risk of getting out and take a look for himself. Luckily for him they did leave and despite a moment of joy and blessing, his immediate thoughts were with the men who were still in that truck and their immediate misfortunes where they were being shipped to. He could not let his emotions overwhelm him as he was yet out of danger at all. He had to make his way to the nearest farm before sunrise where he would have an increased risk of being recaptured by the Germans.

Completely exhausted, starving and nearing symptoms of hypothermia he started to make his way along the tree-lines which he recognised towards the town of Epe. A small town with no more than five thousand inhabitants at the time was where his brother in-law had a farm growing fruits and vegetables. He knew that if he could make it there he would be safe. As the sun rose gently, my grandfather knew he had to hurry to escape from the clutches of the German troops strolling through town. His brother in-law’s house was at the edge of a forest, close to one of the pebble roads. As he was starting to lose hope, he could start to see the end of the tree line in the distance and the outline of a house that resembled the one from his childhood memories. Although almost collapsing from fatigue and starvation, his

adrenaline kicked in as he made a rush for the edge of the forest. His prayers were heard as, with his last breaths, he closed in on the house that was indeed that of his brother in-law. He ran up to the door, knocked and immediately collapsed. Next thing he remembers was lying on the couch with a wet towel on his forehead. Overlooking him were his brother in-law and his wife. He had made it to safety after barely escaping from sure death by the Germans. His faith, strong will and thoughts of his young family had pushed him beyond any ability he could have imagined or hoped for.

Meanwhile in Bussum my father, his mother and family were all terribly worried. Various flashes went through my father's mind but, as he recalls, at that tender age, none of them were of losing your father. When you are young you imagine your father as this indestructible person that can conquer and overcome every situation. You imagine your father to be superman and that he could walk through the front door at any moment like nothing had happened. But as the days went by, certain hope would be replaced by reality. The reality that it would perhaps be different. That this chapter in life might not have a happy ending. Just as all hope would seem to be lost an unfamiliar face came to the house one day. Although new to my father it seemed his mother knew the man.

"This is your uncle dear, my brother who lives in Epe", his mother would inform him.

He has brought us fantastic news which is that your father is safe at his house. Although weakened and tired he is doing well".

My father was overjoyed with happiness but at the same time filled with uncertainty as the war kept raging on. For the next three years, my grandfather would stay in hiding in Epe where he would be safer than in the 'open' in Bussum which was much nearer to big places like Amsterdam. As many times as possible his uncle would come to Bussum to replenish the family with homegrown vegetables, potatoes and fruits. But most of the time the family had to suffer as

food and fresh water was getting scarcer by the week. My father recalls trips he had to take to Epe on foot and by bike to get fresh potatoes and other stocks whenever his uncle was unable to make the horrendous journey. It would literally take him forever as the bike he used no longer had any tires. At a certain point they even conceived wheels made from wood. There is a story in The Netherlands that the Germans took all Dutch bikes during the war which did not reflect reality. The store took on an own life on the 5th of September 1944, known as "*dolle dinsdag*" (mad Tuesday) when the BBC announced that the Allied Forces had crossed the Dutch border. This caused a general panic among Germans and Dutch collaborators, who grabbed all vehicles they could find and fled.

My father's eyes got all teary as he seemingly had a tough time sharing these memories which he had never done before. The scars that the war left behind were well hidden over the years as a mechanism to deal with the pain, sorrow, dead and destruction. However, they had never been forgotten. At such a tender age, nobody should ever have to witness such cruelty that formed my father's opinion and view towards life. It was obviously a rude awakening for him what life was all about as he was faced with direct poverty, hardship and a country ripped apart offering very limited possibilities. As soon as the country was liberated many questions remained unanswered for the family. What does the future hold? Will we be able to financially take care of the family? Will the children be able to go to school? And many more. At the age of fourteen, my father had just lost five precious years which he would never ever get back. There was only one way he knew to deal with the challenging situation which was to keep moving forward with a positive attitude. A character trade that would be so familiar to all that came across him in his life.

PART TWO

THE STRUGGLE UPWARDS

Chapter Three

Rise from the Ashes

1945 - 1954

*"How we survive,
is what makes us who we are"*

— *Tim McIlrath, an American punk rock musician*

Soon the joy of the Allied liberation made way for reality of the state of the country, its cities and foremost economic outlook for employment and opportunities. The loss of those crucial teenage years of personal development and schooling left its own scars deep in the soul of my father. These kind of traumatic experiences either make you weaker or stronger. The Netherlands was totally disrupted after the war in 1945. Almost one million people had been forced by the hostilities to leave hearth and home. Around 220,000 Dutch people had lost their lives during the war. Large parts of the infrastructure such as factories, bridges, roads, ports and railways were destroyed. The trade balance deficit was fourteen percent of the national income and unemployment at an all-time low. The economy was left running at twenty-seven percent of the pre-war 1938 levels with sixty percent of the transportation system destroyed and up to fifteen billion guilders in total damages. The country was in

a state of utter chaos.

The 'Wederopbouw' (Reconstruction) was aided by the Marshall Plan that the Americans offered Europe. President Harry Truman signed the Marshall Plan on 3rd April 1948, granting USD 5 billion in aid to sixteen European nations. During the four years the plan was in effect, the United States donated USD 17 billion (equivalent to USD 189 billion in 2019) in economic and technical assistance to help the recovery of the European countries that joined the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation. Between 1948-1951, The Netherlands received USD 1.128 billion to give shape to the reconstruction of the devastated country. Only a minor part of this astronomical figure was provided in the form of loans, the major part consisted of donations. The money the Netherlands received was largely put towards resolving the most vital troubles: stabilising inflation, housing programs, land reclamation, and relieving the Dutch population of rations; which were suspended in 1948.

The Germans left the Netherlands with 95,000 homes destroyed and damaging well over six-hundred-thousand more. Luckily the family home in Bussum remained undamaged throughout the war so the family at least had one less concern to be worried about.. Having had no decent education, my father was left to wonder what he could do to both assist in the reconstruction of his country as well as develop himself.. From an early age, he noticed he was a very practically minded man. No fuss, '*gewoon doen*' (just do it). He was always very intrigued by the upcoming new technology surrounding cars. His father was fortunate enough to have owned a Ford Model T, although the exact built remains unknown. The Ford Model T is generally regarded as the first affordable automobile produced by the Ford Motor Company from 1908 till 1927. The Model T had a front-mounted 177-cubic-inch (2.9 L) in-line four-cylinder engine, producing twenty horsepower, for a top speed of 64–72 kilometres

per hour. The engine was capable of running on gasoline, kerosene, or ethanol. Colour-wise there was not much choice and the famous quote from Henry Ford's autobiography states "Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black".

When working on his dad's car one day, his mind wondered off thinking of greater things he wanted to achieve. The magic he wanted to create with his hands and how he could develop this skill and interest he had in technology and specifically cars. Looking around him all he saw was despair and misery as the country was in its rebuilding phase. He knew he wanted to get the best out of him, to make things better not just for him but also his family. He knew that in order to do that he needed a vision. A vision of hope and forward thinking and he would not stop till he had achieved it. He realised that in order to accelerate his chances he needed to cross the borders to nations where there was work. But first he had to invest in himself both in theory as well as practical experience. In September 1947, he got his breakthrough when he was hired as an apprentice mechanic at Garage Ben de Fiouw in his hometown of Bussum where he stayed till March of 1948. His interest grew further from just being in a Garage to other rolling mechanical equipment which would later play such a pivotal role in his working life. In March 1948, he joined the well-known Road Construction & Steam Rolling Company Gebr. Hogenbirk in Laren ("Wegenbouw en Stoomwalsenbedrijf"). The two brothers Gerrit and Lourens Hogenbirk founded the company on 14th February 1922 when they were twenty-five and twenty-two years old respectively. The first 'works' were mainly executed for local governments but quickly they expanded to works for the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management. They were one of the first general contractors in the Netherlands who acquired a steamroller. This company posed a major opportunity for my father to not only work for a reputable firm but also to expand his knowledge beyond being a mechanic on just cars. But how was he ever going to

convince them of being the right candidate with the practical experience they were seeking? Exactly, my father would have thought, there is only one way to do that....bluff your way through the interview. No sooner said than done, when being asked whether he had any experience as a welder or how to operate a lathe, he convincingly said YES!! His bluff paid off as he spend two very valuable years with the firm till he was drafted into the Army in May 1950 at the age of twenty.

The Army gave my dad further exposure to explore his craftsmanship when he was placed in the '*Regiment Technische Troepen - RTT*' (Regiment Technical Troops). The main tasks of the regiment were: maintaining tradition, promoting togetherness and special personnel care including the logistical Command for the Equipment. Luckily, during the two years my father was in the Army, there were no war conflicts where the Netherlands were involved in. The Dutch had just pulled out of Indonesia after a long, bloody and misunderstood war in 1949 and had no desire to intervene or interfere themselves elsewhere. After having experienced five terrifying years of war, he was relieved his Army years were spend in peace and focused on further developing himself as an individual.

My father's journey towards humanity continued when he left the Army in 1952. Expanding the choices he has had to make to fundamentally enlarge his opportunities in the still struggling economy in The Netherlands. Although he was now a capable mechanic and versatile across other fields of manual labour, he knew that if he wanted to increase his choices, he had to further educate himself. During the time he worked as a mechanic again at the Lokhorst Garage in Bussum for the next four years, he consigned himself into evening classes across various specialties. And ensure he would have the required paperwork to pursue different paths in life. He completed several courses such as the "Course Certified Operator