

FOREWORD

There's a painting of a small part of Amsterdam in my house. It depicts the Westertoren, as seen from Prinsengracht. I spent my childhood in this neighbourhood. It was a happy childhood, despite the fact that I was born during the war. I bought that painting years ago, as a gift for my wife. It was a costly gift, but I simply had to have it. My wife Toos was born and bred in Amsterdam, just like me. If you look closely, you can see the Secret Annex on the painting. Although I hadn't spotted it when I bought it, later on it turned out to be an extraordinary coincidence.

Sometimes you don't quite understand how important someone has been until you get on a little in age. My father Gerard—I was named after him—was such a person. He was, of course, important to me: he was my father. A modest man; I remember him as someone who worked hard and got much done. As a child, I wasn't overly interested in what exactly it was that he was doing.

I was born in 1943, in the middle of the Second World War. Later, when I was growing up, I didn't hear much about my father's activities during those years of occupation. He didn't



think it was important; at the time, with my mother's help, he had simply done what needed to be done, what every righteous person would have done in his opinion.

Still, it had not left him unmoved and he carried many of those events with him in silence all those years. We only became aware of this much later, when us kids were already married and had moved out, and he had more time to think. That is when the events of that time came back to life for him. He would wander through the house for nights on end, haunted by his memories and unable to sleep peacefully. I was in Canada for work at the time, and my wife Toos lived with him for a few months out of necessity. Whenever he had one of those nights, pacing up and down with sheer restlessness and the stories that were begging to be told, she would put the kettle on (sleeping was impossible anyway) and listen to him talk.

The stories he told her, he had never told us children. He probably wanted to spare us: who wants to burden their children with such horror stories? He had endured fear, taken risks, bluffed and ventured under the occupying forces' watch. He had put himself in danger, and by doing so, he had put us in danger too. But he had no other option; he had been given the opportunity, purely due to the circumstances he was in, to play an important role in the war, in his neighbourhood, at the foot of the Westertoren and around the corner from the Secret Annex. He had seen the girls Anne and Margot walking

around the neighbourhood before the outbreak of the war, holding their father Otto's hand. But he had no idea that they were so close to our house - until the fateful betrayal in 1944, which also proved almost fatal for my father.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Over time, my father has started to talk more and more, and the role he played in the war with my mother has become increasingly clear to me. Many people did what needed to be done; they did what they thought was the only right thing to do. Most people never spoke of it after the liberation. Perhaps it is something that is in our national character: actions speak louder than words. Or maybe it was just too painful. Why drag up all the memories of that gruesome war? They had to continue with their lives; there was no point in looking back, and talking doesn't put food on the table.

My work adventure in Canada was unsuccessful, and I returned to the Netherlands. Little by little, my wife told me the stories my father had entrusted her with. I was profoundly impressed but didn't do much with them. We had a family of our own with a young daughter and a busy life. I was always travelling for work. This story stayed in the background, but I never forgot.

Now, I have been retired for some time and have reached that

age where I look back on my life. Memories are peculiar things. Sometimes, they disappear for years and then, suddenly, they are back: a voice, a scent, a name. As I get older, I notice that more and more fragments from the past are coming back, like a long-delayed echo.

Only now am I beginning to grasp the full scope of my father's story.

I realised that for all those years he had been carrying important pieces of the puzzle with him about the betrayal of the Secret Annex; things that only he could know from his position, but that never came out. My father has passed on, and if I don't bring these facts to light, there won't be anyone left to tell this story.

I decided I wanted to make my father's story public. On the one hand, to do justice to the significance that he carried for the neighbourhood around the Westertoren. On the other hand, because it sheds new light on the identity of the traitor of the Secret Annex. I am personally convinced that my father's story reveals significant new facts. Now that he is gone, and I myself am getting older, this is the moment this war story and this information can still be made public.

CARETAKER ON WESTERMARKT



January 1941

On the corner of Westermarkt and Keizersgracht stood a stately, tall office building. Gerard Kremer rang the doorbell at number 2 Westermarkt. He heard it ring loudly, reverberating through the building. With a click, the heavy wooden front door unlocked automatically. He pushed it further open and carefully closed it behind him. Inside, a doorman sat in a booth by a revolving glass door. It had been stopped. Gerard turned to the doorman.

‘Who are you here to see?’ asked the doorman.

‘I’m here to see Mr Würdemann,’ said Gerard. ‘He’s expecting me.’

The porter scrutinised him from his glass booth and picked up the telephone. This was followed by a short telephone call, which Gerard could not hear. Then the doorman nodded, and the revolving door was set in motion. He entered a high and tiled hallway. At the back wall was an impressive marble staircase with a wooden bannister. He could vaguely smell fresh coffee. It was real coffee, an aroma he hadn’t smelled for a while.

Gerard stood there waiting with his hat in his hands. One of the side doors opened, and a tall, obviously wealthy man came towards him with an outstretched hand.

‘Kremer, isn’t it? My name is Würdemann. Please follow me to my office.’

Mr Würdemann turned around and walked off with the confidence of someone who expects others to follow his orders.

They walked past several rooms, where young women were sitting at typewriters, to the last door in a long corridor. The building stretched further in width than he had imagined from the outside.

The office he entered breathed a different atmosphere than the offices he had just walked past. It had a mahogany desk, with a desk chair upholstered in leather behind it. There was a fabric chair opposite the desk. Gerard obediently sat down in the chair that was indicated. He noticed that he was cautiously hoping that this man would offer him not only a job, but also a cup of real coffee. Right at this moment, both options looked very attractive.

Würdemann sat down opposite him and came straight to the point.

‘Kremer, we have a vacancy for the post of caretaker, and I understand that you may be suitable for the job.’

Gerard turned his hat over in his hands. ‘I hope so, sir. Well, I think so, at least.’

‘What was your last job?’

‘I’m a diamond cutter. Or rather, I was a diamond cutter. But you will understand that, under the circumstances, that is no longer possible. My employer, Mr Polak ...’

He didn’t finish his sentence. Würdemann nodded. The