

"Enemy Under Our Roof" by Johanna M.W.F. Lemke

Reviewed by Eva Hammond

The author has given her family and all other persons mentioned in the book fictitious names for privacy reasons. I would ask that this be respected. In contrast, the events, choices, and emotions are very real. The reader is drawn into the reality of life in the war-torn Netherlands, occupied by the enemy from 1940 to 1945. It is seen through the eyes of the little girl who lived it.

What would war and Nazi occupation mean to Cobie, almost 5 and her adored brother, Marten, 11 years old? War brings terror with thundering planes dropping bombs from the night sky. It breaks relationships when Marten's best friend shows up in a Hitler Youth uniform. It erodes trust when you must watch what you say while playing marbles with neighbour children whose parents are collaborators. And as the grey days of war become months and years Hunger in body and spirit is ever present. It reverses the order of things when the children worry about their father's welfare - will he be taken from them to a labour camp?

The author describes the characters in the memoir by their actions as they are caught up in these horrifying events. Her father is steadfastly true to his principles. He hides all the metal articles that were supposed to be surrendered to the Nazis for munitions factories. He admonishes Marten about the seriousness of their actions. No pranks! Risk must have a reason. He hides their bicycles so that the enemy will not have their use. He engages the Nazi officer billeted in their home in meaningful, often confrontational debate.

The kindergarten teacher, Mrs. DeWit is tasked with teaching air raid drill. She makes it letter perfect for the protection of her charges but adds joy to their days with the puppet theatre.

The actions of the two soldiers billeted in her home, one before Liberation and one after are closely observed and reported by Cobie.

Marten always gives a truthful answer when Cobie is worrying about bombs killing and maiming people. Or puzzling over clothes being buried in the garden. Her brother is her rock and source of information. He teaches her how to identify friend from foe in aerial "dog fights" by their markings. Just what every five-year-old needs to know -- if the five-year-old is in enemy occupied territory. He takes on the responsibility of scrounging train tracks for coal for their stove and working for farmers to get food. Both activities risky in the extreme.

We first meet Cobie, the narrator of the memoir, as a preschooler with a vivid imagination. She is also very inquisitive to find out not only the facts but also, as she matures, the reasons behind the facts. She shares her thoughts and dilemmas with us. How is it that this enemy in Nazi uniform who forced himself into their home has given her a gift of a set of carved animals when she is sick? Her overactive imagination adds to her terror in the early stages of the war. But as she

matures, she uses her imagination to make up plays and games that bring fun and laughter into her family's grey days. It becomes her weapon of war.

Cobie's anchor throughout the long five years of privation and fear is her mother. She is portrayed as a truly real person. Pushed beyond her limit one day she breaks her plate at the dinner table. No plaster saint! However, the reader admires her courage and way of "going straight to the point". When pressured to join the Nazi party by the boss' wife she states her loyalties clearly. She also reminds the woman of their long friendship and wishes her well in the future "which is in God's hands". She gains her strength through prayer both in times of desperation and times of decision. When she resourcefully finds a solution to a problem like finding wool for mittens, she gives prayers of thanksgiving. When accosted by a distant neighbour, Mr. Smidt, she replies to his insinuations of being a Nazi sympathizer, "I love my country, I love my Queen and I love God above all" - a statement that could have landed her in concentration camp! In answer to Cobie's fearful questioning, she says she just got too angry at the distrust between her own people. The pastor of the church comes to tea with "rumours" from the congregation when she is caring for the wounded Nazi officer after his bike's collision with a truck. Reverend Terpstra gets the same treatment as Mr. Smidt. She looks him straight in the eye and says, "I do not believe I should lay aside my Christian compassion in wartime and take it up again in peace time".

The clear concise historical notes are essential for the reader's understanding of events as they unfold. Placing them throughout the narrative instead of at the back of the book is helpful. In addition to reading an account of WWII in the Netherlands we see the privation, destruction, distrust, Resistance and Liberation through the eyes of children, Cobie and Marten. An important document for our grandchildren. A very moving memoir.



Author's family at liberation with Canadian soldier William McKeever May 1945



Hengelo neighbourhood gang 1946



Author at 9 yrs. of age



The Dutch Lion of Cobie's imagination.

Eva Hammond