

2014

# War in the Countryside: Re-examining Life in the Netherlands during World War II through the Memories of Dutch Immigrants to Ontario

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War in the Countryside: Re-examining Life in the  
Netherlands during World War II through the  
Memories of Dutch Immigrants to Ontario

By

**Adam Roffel**

A Major Research Paper

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of History  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts  
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2014

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War in the Countryside: Re-examining Life in the Netherlands during  
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**Adam Roffel**

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April 23, 2014

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## ABSTRACT

The History of the Netherlands during World War Two paints a one sided view of what war was like. While urban life receives lots of attention in English literature, rural life is often neglected. Through the stories of six individuals who immigrated to Canada in the decade following World War Two, a separate wartime experience will be examined and discussed.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my amazingly supportive wife Alyssa, and my two boys Logan and Lochlan. Also to my parents and siblings for all the support they have given me over the years.

This is also in memory of my grandparents, Arie Van Eyk, Mable Roffel, and John Roffel.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper would not have happened if not for the help of my advisor, Dr. Miriam Wright. I also am deeply grateful to those who volunteered to help with my study: Frances Van Eyk, Henk VanGiessen, Peter Flikweert, Anne Groenenberg, William Van Welly, and Alan Hoekstra.

I also want to thank Dr. Frans Schryer, professor at the University of Guelph, for his helpful insight and early opinions on my work, as well as Dr. Rob Nelson who provided some last minute advice as my second reader.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration of Originality	iii
Abstract	iv
Dedication	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	1
Historiography	4
Popular Literature	5
Academic Literature	9
Methodology	15
Memory and History	15
Subjects and Procedures	18
The Rural Experience	23
Food Consumption	23
The Relative Lack of Disease in Rural Areas	27
The Lack of Black Market Involvement	30
Few Rural Dutch Men taken to Germany	32
Lack of Hostility Towards the Germans	34
Why Canada	36
Conclusion	39
Appendices	42
Appendix A: Interview Questions	42
References/Bibliography	44
Vita Auctoris	47



## Introduction

World War Two is remembered as a horrific event in world history with millions of people dead, and millions left to rebuild their lives without family or businesses. For those in Europe, where much of the fighting took place, it was especially significant. Their actual experiences, however, varied considerably, depending on the country or region. For the Dutch, the liberation of their country by Canadian troops in 1945 was an important moment, as they had just endured five long years of Nazi occupation, resulting in the deaths of thousands of citizens, bombed-out cities, flooded farmland, and lack of basic living necessities. While many Canadians today are aware of the role Canada played in the liberation of the Netherlands, knowledge of how that country experienced the war is limited. University of Toronto Professor Henry G. Schogt wrote in his 2003 book, *The Curtain: Witness and Memory in Wartime Holland*, “Yet apart from the liberation itself, the enthusiastic reception of the Canadians by the Dutch, and the desolate state of the Netherlands at the moment, little is known in Canada about what happened during the war.”<sup>1</sup> While this comment may apply to the population at large, there is a fair amount of literature on the subject. However, that literature is selective, focusing primarily on those who lived in the large cities where they experienced the harshest realities of war. Urban citizens dealt with more hardships such as extreme hunger, repressive curfew laws, and contagious diseases than those in rural areas. These problems were magnified during a period of severe hunger in the Netherlands from

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<sup>1</sup> Henry G. Schogt, *The Curtain: Witness and Memory in Wartime Holland* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2003), x.

September 1944 till liberation in May 1945, known as the *Hongerwinter* (Hunger Winter), and it receives that majority of written attention.

As a result of that focus on the extreme hardships of occupied Netherlands, the experiences of urban citizens are widely perceived as the norm. This leaves a one-sided story of how the Dutch lived under Nazi occupation, a story which continues to be told again and again in schools, universities, and in popular literature. While not downplaying the horrors of life in the Netherlands during World War Two, it is important to highlight different experiences, besides those of the residents of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, or The Hague. These four cities were the largest in the Netherlands in 1940, coming from some of the most populated provinces. Amsterdam in Northern Holland, Rotterdam and The Hague in Southern Holland, and Utrecht in the province of Utrecht had a population of 4.365 million, almost half of the Netherlands estimated 9 million inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> What is missing from the narratives are the experiences of rural inhabitants of the Netherlands, tens of thousands of whom emigrated to Canada in the decade following World War Two.

Those living outside the major city centers represented a large portion of the Dutch population, and also contributed to the war effort in various ways. Published personal experiences such as *Dancing in Bomb Shelters: My Diary of Holland in World War Two* by Johanna Wycoff reveal the importance of farmers and small villages in providing food as well as shelter and protection.<sup>3</sup> That food, shelter and protection

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<sup>2</sup> B.R. Mitchell, *International Historical Statistics : Europe, 1750-2005* (New York, New York: Palgrave Mcmillian, 2007), 231.

<sup>3</sup> Johanna Wycoff, *Dancing in Bomb Shelters: My Diary of Holland in World War Two* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse Publishing, 2010).

helped sustain and save those who may have otherwise perished. What follows is an examination of a specific group of individuals, Dutch farmers children and young adults from the provinces of Friesland in the north, Overijssel in the east, and Zeeland in the south, who were all between the ages of six and fifteen at the start of the war. These individuals eventually made their way to Canada in the decade following the end of World War Two under a special program intended to bring Dutch farmers to the country. This paper will focus on six Dutch immigrants to Southern and Southwestern Ontario, and the ways their experiences differ from wider perceptions and portrayals of occupied Netherlands. It will also provide insights into the experiences of thousands of Dutch immigrants who came to Canada in such large numbers after the war.

On the whole, the experiences of the people interviewed for this project differed from those who lived in the cities in several ways. Food was easily available in rural areas since communities were smaller and were often populated with farmers. Having enough food to eat also contributed to a healthier community. While disease ravaged western cities, it was much less common in smaller, rural areas. Farming had other advantages as German army officials relied on local Dutch farmers to get food for their troops; armies did need to eat after all. For this reason, farming families were generally left alone, only being called upon to house German soldiers or Dutch men the Germans had brought from the cities to rural areas to work. Furthermore, Germans were less likely to forcibly remove young men from rural Dutch families to work in German factories, as they did with urban and larger town dwellers. This perhaps affected how the rural Dutch felt about Germans; those interviewed for this project did not express much disdain or hatred towards them. Finally, the black market did not seem to be as prevalent in the

rural areas of the Netherlands as it was in the urban space, partially because the need for contraband was not as great. Those within walking distance of cities had the best opportunity to participate in the black market, but that would only include a small percentage of individuals. Those who lent their stories to this project have provided insight into the greater diversity of the way people experienced the war, particularly those in the rural occupied areas of the Netherlands.

### **Historiography**

For such a small country, the Netherlands during World War Two has received a great deal of popular and scholarly attention. Much of the literature in English has been published memoirs. The most well-known account of life in the Netherlands during this period is the diary of Anne Frank, later published with the title, *The Diary of a Young Girl*.<sup>4</sup> Another example is Henri Van Der Zee's book titled, *The Hunger Winter: Occupied Holland 1944-1945*. In his introduction, Van Der Zee, who was a young boy during the war, gave a succinct reason for writing a book on the most difficult year of the war for many inhabitants: "I certainly have not written this book to stir up ill-feelings or old hatreds. I feel strongly, however, that we should never forget the consequences of a detestable system and an inhumane regime."<sup>5</sup> These two accounts reveal the dramatic stories of hardship and inhumanity, and much of the published literature on the Netherlands during the war, both popular and academic, explores these themes.

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Frank, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday Publishing, 1952).

<sup>5</sup> Henri Van Der Zee, *Occupied Holland: The Hunger Winter 1944-1945* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press 1998), 16.

*Popular Literature*

The most well-known popular work on life in the Netherlands during the war is Anne Frank's diary which has been published in numerous countries, translated into fifty-five languages and has even slipped into popular culture through films and plays.<sup>6</sup> Anne Frank's tales are gripping and horrific, but her experience was very specific – not only that of a city dweller, living in Amsterdam, but also as a member of a Jewish family in hiding from the Nazis. The problem with something as popular as Frank's diary is that it became the blueprint for life in an occupied city, or even more broadly, life in the Netherlands. This is not to say Anne Frank's diary has no value, as it is an excellent perspective on how a young Jewish girl coped with living in hiding in the Netherlands. It is not, however, representative of how everyone in the Netherlands experienced the war. The exceptional accounts like Frank's showing danger and suspense attract more readers.

Historical novelist Martina Reilly wrote an article for an independent Irish newspaper titled, "What Makes an Ordinary Life so Compelling to Read?" In the article she brings up the example of Anne Frank, saying her story is compelling because Anne represents "innocence in the face of evil."<sup>7</sup> It represents the encounter between Nazis and their victims, personalizing and individualizing a much larger phenomenon. Often, the experiences of a specific person are more compelling than the experiences of a group. People can connect to individual stories more than they can to groups where details of the individuals are often absent.

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<sup>6</sup> Hedda Rosner Kopf, *Understanding Anne Frank's The Diary of a Young Girl* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1997), xi.

<sup>7</sup> Martina Reilly, "What Makes an Ordinary Life so Compelling to Read?" February 5, 2013. *The Irish Independent* <<http://www.independent.ie/lifestyle/what-makes-an-ordinary-life-so-compelling-to-read-29049727.html>>

Many other memoirs dedicated to particular subjects have also been written, and recently published books tend to portray World War Two through the eyes of children. One example is Jan De Groot's compelling story of his life in the Netherlands during the war years. De Groot, who was born in The Hague in 1932, writes in great detail how he and his mother were forced to run when his father was taken by the Germans. De Groot's story is not unique; it was common for the Germans to perform raids on homes and business in the Netherlands' largest cities to find replacement workers for the German men who left for the war.<sup>8</sup> A story about a child and his mother fleeing the Nazis reveals the dangers of the time, making it interesting to many readers. Much like the story of Anne Frank, De Groot's story is an example of "innocence in the face of evil."<sup>9</sup>

Another book that has garnered a lot of attention is Kristen Den Hartog's, *The Occupied Garden: A Family Memoir of War-Torn Holland*<sup>10</sup>. Unlike the authors of most other memoirs, Den Hartog was from a farming family. And unlike most farmers, they did experience hardship and ended up losing their home, their sense of freedom, and their financial security. What distinguishes their experience, however, is that their farm was close to The Hague, a major urban centre. Being close to cities was challenging as people who lived there were much more likely to be targets of German soldiers looking for men to send to work in Germany. Farmers in this community would also have had to deal with a much larger demand for their goods from urban citizens making treks out to

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<sup>8</sup> De Groot, Jan. *A Boy in War* (Winlaw, BC: Sono Nis Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Reilly, "What Makes an Ordinary Life so Compelling."

<sup>10</sup> Kristin Den Hartog, *The Occupied Garden: A Family Memoir of War-Torn Holland* (Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart, 2009).

the farms.<sup>11</sup> This provided an opportunity for involvement in the black market, which ended up hurting these farmers as the government cracked down on this after the war.<sup>12</sup> Although compelling to read, the story is not representative of the average family in rural Netherlands during the war.

One of the most well-known popular accounts of the war is Henri Van Der Zee's *The Hunger Winter: Occupied Holland 1944-1945*. Van Der Zee recounts his experiences as a young boy of ten, and adds to his personal story a well researched look at those greatly affected by the famine. Although he never states where he lived during the Hunger Winter, it is clear his stories are based in Amsterdam. Van Der Zee's book paints an excellent image of life in the big city during World War Two. He recalled, "The lack of transportation, gas and electricity had created an atmosphere of deadly apathy which covered the whole of western Holland like a thick, grey blanket."<sup>13</sup> Van Der Zee recalls people saying that the "good Lord" had become pro-Nazi, to inflict such a terrible trial on the people of the Netherlands.<sup>14</sup> Van Der Zee provides numerous examples of poor living conditions in Amsterdam during the Hunger Winter which had a devastating effect on thousands of Dutch families.

The lack of food and fuel in the major cities of the Netherlands, such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht, led to desperation among the people. Van Der Zee remembers one incident when "The contents of an accidentally spilled bin for the central

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<sup>11</sup> Den Hartog, *The Occupied Garden: A Family Memoir of War-Torn Holland*.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with William Van Wely, August 2, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Van Der Zee, *The Hunger Winter*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Van Der Zee, *The Hunger Winter*, 69.

kitchen were scraped off the streets with spoons, and nobody bothered about hygiene.”<sup>15</sup> He later recalls how citizens would rip the wood off the tramlines in order to heat their homes since fuel became impossible to find near the end of the war.<sup>16</sup> Bathing was a low priority as well, although it was most likely caused by the lack of soap. The small, one room living quarters in which most Dutch families in the urban areas lived were hotbeds for contagious bacteria. Dutch housewives were given rationed soap supplements, but most found the supplement so useless that they gave up on cleaning altogether. This meant that dishes were used over and over again, beds were slept in again and again, and children were rarely cleaned.<sup>17</sup>

Van Der Zee suggests that farmers did not experience the same hardships as those in the cities. Indeed, he claimed farmers helped his family in a time of need, as detailed in his chapter title, “Out to the Farms.” He remembers city people would get some relief by making visits to the countryside, where decent meals and places to sleep were often willingly offered.<sup>18</sup>

Reminiscences of war events such as the liberation of the Netherlands by the Canadians, often documented in liberation anniversary books, are also widely popular. The Dutch, both in the Netherlands and in the diaspora, still observe the anniversary of liberation. Special illustrated “coffee-table books” commemorating specific years have been published. One example is *Holland and the Canadians: Liberation of Holland 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemorative Edition*, compiled by Major Norman and J. Nikerk Phillips,

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<sup>15</sup> Van Der Zee, *The Hunger Winter*, 147.

<sup>16</sup> Van Der Zee, *The Hunger Winter*, 164.

<sup>17</sup> Van Der Zee, *The Hunger Winter*, 153.

<sup>18</sup> Van Der Zee, *The Hunger Winter*, 72-77.



which can be found on bookshelves in many Dutch-Canadians' homes.<sup>19</sup> The continuing Dutch gratitude to the Canadians is recognized in the various stories of heroism included in these collections. Many stories that found their way into these books and magazines were excerpts from personal memoirs; often, the more horrific stories of war and liberation were highlighted. These memoirs are sometimes published for mass consumption, or are just meant to satisfy family curiosity.

### *Academic Literature*

The academic books and articles focus on a few major aspects of life in the Netherlands, namely the Hunger Winter and the resistance movement. An in-depth look at the resistance movement can be found in *Resistance in Western Europe*, a collection featuring articles about resistance movements in different parts of Nazi-occupied Europe. Dick van Galen Last's article on the Netherlands paid particular attention to how resisters in the Netherlands worked like a well-oiled machine.<sup>20</sup> Another important book is Mark Zuehlke's, *On to Victory: The Canadian Liberation of the Netherlands*.<sup>21</sup> Historians such Zuehlke write for an academic audience, but tend to place their emphasis on city life rather than rural. For Zuehlke, liberation was most prominently seen and appreciated in the cities, and therefore his focus lies there.

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<sup>19</sup> Major Norman and J Nikerk Phillips, *Holland and the Canadians: Liberation of Holland 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemorative Edition* (Brampton, Ontario: Dutch-Canadian Bi-Weekly Publishing, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Dick van Galen Last, "The Netherlands," in Bob Moore, ed. *Resistance in Western Europe*. (New York: Berg Publishing 2000), 189-222.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Zuelke, *On to Victory: The Canadian Liberation of the Netherlands, March 23-May 5 1945* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre, 2010).

Most academic English literature on the Netherlands during World War Two focuses on the experience as a whole, as well as living conditions, the Hunger Winter and disease. Everyday life during occupation in urban areas has been extensively covered by authors such as Warner Warmbrunn and W.F. De Gaay Fortman. Fortman, writing immediately after the war ended, looks at the impact of occupation on the Dutch.<sup>22</sup> He claimed German legislation at the beginning of occupation pushed the Dutch cost of living to record heights; by September of 1941, the cost of living had risen 28%, and the cost of food alone rose 43%.<sup>23</sup> Warmbrunn's account of occupation came almost a decade after the war ended. He examines the impact of German occupation on Dutch civilians, looking at the cost of living, food supply, and demographic issues. His focus is clearly on showing the hardship and direct impact that occupation had on the population, but pays particular attention to urban dwellers.<sup>24</sup>

A number of academic works focus especially on the Hunger Winter. Nicky Hart may have compiled the most specific work on the impact of the Hunger Winter in his 2003 article titled, "Maternal Nutrition, and Infant Mortality: A Re-examination of the Dutch Hunger Winter."<sup>25</sup> Hart focused on the impact of the Dutch government order railway strike on the Netherlands. While most popular accounts of the Hunger Winter, such as Van Der Zee's book, focus on the effects on individuals and families, Hart uses statistics and evidence to determine what the Hunger Winter cost the Netherlands in

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<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm Friedrich de Gaay Fortman, "Living Standards," *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 245 (1946).

<sup>23</sup> de Gaay Fortman, "Living Standards," 81.

<sup>24</sup> Werner Warmbrunn, *The Dutch Under German Occupation, 1940-1945* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1963).

<sup>25</sup> Nicky Hart, "Famine, Maternal Nutrition and Infant Mortality: A Re-examination of the Dutch Hunger Winter," *Population Studies* 47 (1993).

terms of health, disease, and death. His work on maternal nutrition and infant mortality draws upon earlier research such as Dr. Marc Daniels' 1949 article on the Hunger Winter and tuberculosis, and Geoffrey Edsall's 1959 article on typhoid fever.<sup>26</sup> Other earlier works on the health impact include M.J.L Dols and D.J.A.M van Arcken's 1946 study of the food supply and the level of nutrition in the Netherlands during the war. A 1947 study by C. Banning and Henrietta A. Lohr examined child mortality rates due to disease and malnutrition.<sup>27</sup> What articles such as these demonstrate is that city dwellers did suffer significant hardship which had a direct impact on overall health.

Other scholars have looked at the aftermath of the war, and specifically demographic pressure and economic issues that led thousands of citizens to emigrate to countries around the world, including Canada. Dutch economists Aslan Zorlu and Joop Hartog, who analyzed the depressed Dutch economy after the war, have estimated that roughly 480,000 people emigrated out of Holland between 1946 and 1972. Those who left were given help from the Dutch government as overpopulation was causing high unemployment numbers.<sup>28</sup> In 1947, Canada and the Netherlands agreed on a settlement plan called the Family Farms Movement or the Canada Netherlands Settlement Scheme. Anthony Sas claims that in the decade after the end of World War Two, roughly 110,000

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<sup>26</sup> Hart, "Famine, Maternal Nutrition and Infant Mortality," 27-46.

<sup>27</sup> J.L. Dols and D.J.A.M van Arcken, "Food Supply and Nutrition in the Netherlands during and Immediately after World War II," *The Millbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 24 (October 1946).  
C. Banning and Henriette A. Lohr, "Occupied Holland," *The British Medical Journal* 1 (1947).

<sup>28</sup> Aslan Zorlu and Joop Hartog, "Migration and Immigration: The Case of the Netherlands," *Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper* (2001), 7.

of these emigrants headed for Canada.<sup>29</sup> The majority of those came between 1947-1952, working in agricultural.

University of Guelph professor Frans Schryer published two books on the Netherlandic people in Canada, with a special emphasis on Ontario, where the majority of Dutch immigrants to Canada settled. His 1998 book, *The Netherlandic Presence in Ontario: Pillars, Class, and Dutch Ethnicity*, examines the Dutch immigrants' adaptation to life in Ontario. In particular, he looks at their religious affiliation, business ventures, and class structure.<sup>30</sup> His follow-up work published in 2006, *Farming in a Global Economy: A Case Study of Dutch Immigrant Farmers in Canada*, went into more detail than his previous book, explaining the expertise the Dutch brought to agro-business from their rural roots in the Netherlands, and how it helped shaped and advance farming within Canada.<sup>31</sup>

In *The Netherlandic Presence*, Schryer looks at the life Dutch immigrants made for themselves in Ontario after immigrating to Canada. Approximately 35%, or 185,000 of the emigrants who left the Netherlands between 1946 and 1982 came to Ontario.<sup>32</sup> They came in waves: first, the Dutch war brides in 1946, followed by farm hands in the late '40s and early '50s, and then followed by skilled trades workers after 1952.<sup>33</sup> Schryer identifies four reasons why the Dutch left the Netherlands: the trauma of the war

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<sup>29</sup> Anthony Sas, "Dutch Concentrations in Rural Southwestern Ontario During the Postwar Decade." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 48 (1958), 185.

<sup>30</sup> Frans Schryer, *The Netherlandic Presence in Ontario: Pillars, Class, and Dutch Ethnicity* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Frans Schryer, *Farming in a Global Economy: A Case Study of Immigrant Farmers in Canada* (Leiden, South Holland: Brill Publishing, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Schryer, *The Netherlandic Presence in Ontario*, 46.

<sup>33</sup> Schryer, *The Netherlandic Presence in Ontario*, 42.

and what followed it, concerns about increased socialism in the Netherlands, the desire to leave because they saw other community and family members go, and the lack of adequate land, which meant that many younger rural couples decided to leave the country to start farming on their own, rather than waiting to inherit the family farm in the Netherlands.<sup>34</sup> The last reason is why many farmers left the Netherlands, a claim adequately defended by Schryer and further verified by those who partook in this study. When the Germans flooded the south, hundreds of acres of farmland were destroyed, leaving many displaced farmers without enough land for their growing families. For many people from these southern provinces, Canada offered a very real opportunity for success.

Schryer notes that the Dutch who came to Ontario had a higher degree of education compared to other immigrants, and were not forced into urban communities to find waged work.<sup>35</sup> Instead, they used their agricultural expertise to make a living. After the war brides came to Canada directly after the war the immigrants continued to come in waves, with the next post-World War Two wave heading to Canada to work as farm hands. Many of these same immigrants ended up purchasing large farms. Those who came in the late 1950s to 1960s took up a range of trades.

Schryer dedicates a portion of his book to the “farm immigrants.” Canadian farmers often got hardworking farm hands with plenty of experience, although on occasion, they were tricked into accepting a hand with no prior training.<sup>36</sup> Many immigrants moved from prosperous farms in Holland, to lowly farm hand employment in

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<sup>34</sup> Schryer, *The Netherlandic Presence in Ontario*, 48-52.

<sup>35</sup> Schryer, *The Netherlandic Presense in Ontario*, 1-2.

<sup>36</sup> Schryer, *The Netherlandic Presense in Ontario*, 57.

Ontario; it is no surprise, therefore, that so many Dutch immigrants worked towards owning their own farms.<sup>37</sup>

Schryer's second book, *Farming in a Global Economy*, takes a closer look at the Dutch in Canada, with a special emphasis on the Dutch farmers. He provides numerous experiences, one of which was specific to Chatham, ON. Kerr Farms hired a Dutch family to work in 1947, which led to subsequent families moving to Chatham; Kerr Farms built a successful business on the willing work of Dutch immigrants.<sup>38</sup> Eventually, the Dutch entrenched themselves in Canadian society, building Reformed or frequenting established Catholic churches, and developing schools, which were Dutch in their make-up, but not in their name. A good example is Chatham Christian Schools, a Kindergarten through grade 12 school still in operation in Chatham, Ontario. Similar schools and churches exist in farming communities around Ontario, including London and the Niagara region.

Schryer's books provide the best discussion on Dutch immigration to Canada, and more specifically, Southern Ontario. The information he provides places the research in this paper into context. It shows the numerous reasons for why so many people left the Netherlands after World War Two, and also how their life in the Netherlands impacted how they settled and expanded in Canada.

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<sup>37</sup> Schryer, *the Netherlandic Presense in Ontario*, 58-59.

<sup>38</sup> Frans Schryer, *Farming in a Global Economy*, 95-97.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this paper is to examine the stories and memories of rural Dutch people who later immigrated to Ontario, hoping that their stories will add a rural dimension to our larger understanding of the war experience in the Netherlands. Dealing with memories that are roughly seventy years old, however, poses a number of problems, and calls into question the use of oral sources in history. Written sources, even ones that date hundreds or thousands of years, are often seen as a more reliable source of information than an individual's memory. While often contentious, oral history still has a place in research today.

## *Memory and History*

Memory as a theoretical approach is constantly being debated. Skepticism arises because of the high number of outside influences that can, and will, affect memory. Age is a main issue as the individual may have been too young to accurately remember events. As well, at the time of interviewing or writing the individual could be too old and suffering from memory loss. Another issue is whether or not bias plays a role in how the past is remembered, or if current events have altered one's understanding of the past. With the subject being discussed here, do the viewpoints of Hitler and his regime cloud or alter the memories of individuals who lived during that time, perhaps in an exaggerated and unfair way? This is possible, and needs to be taken into consideration while researching.

There are two streams of thought when dealing with memory and history. Historians such as Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs argue that history and memory

are two distinct categories. Maurice Halbwachs view of memory is incredibly narrow, yet it appears to hold a lot of validity. Halbwachs, in his book, *The Collective Memory*, dedicates an entire chapter to memory and history. Although he makes numerous claims, two stand out. First, he concludes that memory is confined to an individual's lifetime. The moment that person has passed, their memories disappear. Secondly, Halbwachs argues that individuals cannot claim the memories of others as their own personal memories. He writes, "Our memory truly rests not on learned history but on lived history."<sup>39</sup>

Pierre Nora, who has taken the ideas of Halbwachs and "reformulated them,"<sup>40</sup> argues that "memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists."<sup>41</sup> It has become history. Nora argues for three types of memory: real memory, integrated memory, and modern memory. Real memory, he believes, lived and died with ancient and archaic societies. Nora continues to argue that integrated memory "is memory without a past that constantly recycles a heritage."<sup>42</sup> Modern memory, according to Nora, is the memory that no longer exists, because it has ceased to be memory, and forever will be considered history. The only memory we carry today is a brain full of mostly useless facts, which one-day we may need to recall.<sup>43</sup> For these reasons, Nora's view of history and memory is embodied by hopelessness: history is, and always will be, incomplete,

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<sup>39</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1980), 57.

<sup>40</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>41</sup> Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>42</sup> Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 8.



while memory relies on historical uncertainties and vague assumptions of the past,<sup>44</sup> a claim that is much too cynical to be taken seriously. After all, numerous histories that we have today are based on memory, and many of them are universally accepted. The overarching belief of Nora is that there must be a separation between memory and history.

Other historians, such as Patrick Geary and David Thelen believe that memory plays an integral role in how we create history. David Thelen, emeritus professor at the University of Indiana, wrote in his 1989 paper titled “Memory and American History” that memory and history run parallel to each other. The memories of individuals sometimes challenge conventional interpretation of events, and allow historians to pose questions that may challenge the way we see history. For Thelen, the questions historians can ask create a bridge over the gap that has been created between professional history and the wider audience.<sup>45</sup> For example, those who lived through World War Two have numerous memories of it, but that does not mean that they can connect with what professional historians are writing. Asking questions that may challenge or alter our understanding of the past helps connect those with memories to professional writers, who in turn can rewrite or reinterpret the past. Thelen argues memories have historical merit for several reasons. First, memories are constructed, and are not constantly reproduced. Thelen disagrees with the common perception that memories change drastically the more they are recalled. He concedes that memory changes, but only within the context of the present and what an individual has learned since the moment they are attempting to

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<sup>44</sup> Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> David Thelen, “Memory and American History,” *The Journal of American History* 75 (1989): 1117.

recall.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, Thelen argues that memory is not created in “isolation but in conversation with others that occur in the contexts of community, broader politics, and social dynamics.”<sup>47</sup> The second of his two arguments is what is most important to this discussion. Dutch immigrants that went to Canada after World War Two ended up in a few specific areas in Quebec, Ontario and the prairies. These communities held onto their roots, especially when it came to religion and lifestyle. The stories from all the volunteers in this study are interesting on their own, but do not provide a larger picture unless they are all looked at together. When put together, it is possible to see how the war is a large part of the collective memory of the Dutch immigrants, and this can be seen in the way that the war had continued to be recognized as an important part of their past. We see it in the way that Dutch Canadians still celebrate liberation by the Canadians. They also take treks to Ottawa for the Tulip Festival<sup>48</sup> and many own commemorative coffee table books related to the war experience. This collective memory also helps alter the larger understanding of the different ways that people experienced the war in the Netherlands.

### *Subjects and Procedure*

Using subjects from south-western Ontario was not only a decision based on personal preference, but also one that is historically relevant. Both sets of my grandparents emigrated from Holland to Canada after World War Two, and eventually settled in Chatham-Kent. Chatham-Kent, London, and the Niagara area are heavily

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<sup>46</sup> Thelen, “Memory and American History,” 1120.

<sup>47</sup> Thelen, “Memory and American History,” 1119.

<sup>48</sup> Tulip bulbs are sent to Canada by the Netherlands in recognition of their support during the war.

populated with Dutch immigrants, owing to the rich farmland that attracted those coming to Canada as part of the Canada-Netherlands farm scheme program. Anthony Sas found that 25% of the people from the Netherlands who came to Ontario between 1944 and 1956 came to Chatham-Kent, Essex County, and Lambton County.<sup>49</sup> This was roughly 11,000 people.<sup>50</sup> The large number of Dutch individuals still living in the Chatham-Kent area and the existence of an active Dutch-Canadian community made it much easier to attract potential interviewees.

To recruit participants, I posted flyers in areas where large numbers of elderly Dutch people were likely to congregate, including churches and the local Dutch products store in Chatham; however, most candidates heard about my project through conversations with others. For myself, the tight Dutch community made this project possible, and many individuals contacted me, willing to lend their stories to my project. The Dutch community in Chatham-Kent is very extensive, and there is a strong sense of pride about being Dutch. So much of what went on during the war, as well as their early years in Canada, shaped who Dutch people continue to be: hard working individuals who take pride in their heritage. Many Dutch immigrants, whether they participated in this study or not, made a point of mentioning how they hoped some of their stories would be chronicled in some way. For a few, this paper is their way.

All Dutch immigrants were invited to participate, so long as they were old enough to remember life during World War Two. As most of the Dutch immigrants living in the Chatham-Kent area came to Canada to work in agriculture, it should not be surprising

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<sup>49</sup> Sas, "Dutch Concentration in Rural Southwestern Ontario," 185.

<sup>50</sup> Sas, "Dutch Concentration in Rural Southwestern Ontario," 186-187.

that all the people who participated in this project were living in rural areas of the Netherlands during the war. Although all the subjects were from rural areas, a few found themselves in the Netherlands' largest cities at various points during the war, which made their interviews valuable to the research. They provided insights into both rural and urban experiences and noted the differences. It also helps give context to the experiences of the rural dwellers who were affected by the war, although to a different extent.

I initially spoke to a number of people about this project, aiming to speak to immigrants from different parts of the Netherlands. Although many volunteered, almost half were either too young to remember the war very well, or too old and forgetful to be of significant value to this project. In the end, six subjects met the right criteria, and were old enough to be able to remember life during wartime. All the interviewees were offered anonymity, but either did not care whether they were anonymous or not, or felt that having their story told was important. This was beneficial for me since the ability to put a name to a story gives it a greater impact.

The people interviewed for this project were Frances van Eyk, Alan Hoekstra, Ann Groenberg, Henk Van Giessen, Peter Flikweert, and William Van Welly. Frances van Eyk was born in 1934 in the province of Overijssel which borders Germany. Her family made a living by mixed farming. She eventually moved to Ontario in 1951 where her family continued to farm. Alan Hoekstra was born in 1935 in the northern province of Friesland. His father was a dairy farmer who grew a few potatoes on the side. Alan moved to Canada in 1954 where he spent many years working as a farm hand outside Ottawa and in Chatham. Ann Groenberg was born in 1926 in the eastern province of Gelderland near the German border. Her family did various types of farming to make a

living. She was married in the Netherlands before coming to Canada in 1950 through a sponsorship by the Vellinga family in Chatham. Her husband worked for five years as a farm hand outside Hamilton before they purchased a farm in Ridgetown in 1955. Henk Van Giessen was born in 1928 in a small town a few hours outside Rotterdam, in the southern province of South Holland. His father was a small scale farmer, growing potatoes and vegetables. Van Giessen left the Netherlands in 1949. When United States officials accused him of trying to avoid his compulsory military service in the Dutch military, Van Giessen decided to come to Chatham, Ontario, despite the fact that his fiancé was going to Iowa.<sup>51</sup> Van Giessen and his wife were married within a year, and his wife's family followed her to Canada and purchased a farm outside London, Ontario. Despite being sponsored by a farmer, Van Giessen avoided the rules of the Canada-Netherlands Settlement Scheme and worked as a welder instead. Peter Flikweert was born in 1926 in the south-western province of Zeeland. His father was a farmer with sixteen acres; he also had cows and pigs. Flikweert went to Toronto, Ontario, in 1954, but moved to Wallaceburg shortly thereafter. Flikweert told me that "farming was never in my heart" and went on to work as a janitor for Union Gas in Chatham. William Van Wely was born in 1920 in central Holland, growing up on his father's large scale farm before attending an agricultural college near his home. In 1951 Van Wely moved to Grimsby, Ontario, and ran a successful mill there for many years.

Each subject was interviewed for approximately an hour and questions were broken down into a number of subcategories: life before Nazi occupation, life during

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<sup>51</sup> Van Giessen was accused of avoiding participating in the Indonesian War. Since he was the only provider in his family, however, his mandatory participation was waved.

Nazi occupation, liberation, and immigration to Canada. The primary goal of these questions was to determine quality of life. Interviewees were also asked about disease, treatment by the Germans, and their opinion of the war. I concluded the interviews with a short conversation about their reasons for going to Canada, and what life was like upon arrival in a new country.

Initially, I was uncertain of what I would find and who I would get as interviewees, and I did not ask specifically for subjects from either rural or urban areas of the Netherlands. However, as the process unfolded, I began to see a strong rural connection in those who volunteered. I also noticed a difference in my subjects' accounts from what was often portrayed in literature on the Netherlands during World War Two. The goal of the interviews was to get an idea of what everyday life was like for the average Dutch citizen. Questions were not just based on what I thought would be interesting, but also on findings from the literature on the subject. While some things were consistent with the popular narrative, many remarks also challenged it.

For many of the subjects, being from outside the major cities may have contributed to their willingness to speak on the topic. Initially, I was worried, and warned by others that war survivors will often refuse to talk about their experiences. The opposite, however, proved to be true. All of the immigrants were very open to discussing their wartime experiences, and I was never asked to skip questions. However, every individual who interviewed for this project spent most of the war years in rural Netherlands which was more removed from direct attacks and the harsher aspects of Nazi occupation. These individuals did not deal with the harshest realities of war, and therefore may have been more inclined to participate.

## The Rural Experience

### *Food Consumption: Malnutrition in the Cities, Full Stomachs in the Country*

Although the Hunger Winter dominated much of the literature in English on the experience of civilians during the war, it was evident from my interviews that those in rural areas rarely experienced severe food shortages and famine. Those interviewed for this paper claimed they always had enough to eat. Anne Groenenberg recalled never being hungry during the war because as farmers, food was always readily available. She told me, “Personally I wasn’t a day hungry because we were into farming.”<sup>52</sup> She claimed that even at the end of the war when the Germans blew up the dykes and she and her family were forced to move into their barn because of the flooding, they still had enough food.<sup>53</sup> Frances Van Eyk, living on her father’s small farm in the eastern region close to the German border, also claimed they had enough to keep from starving. Potatoes, meat, and many vegetables were always plentiful. Van Eyk explained,

There was enough food for us and our family. Being a farmer, but we could not get all kinds of food. We had coupons, food stamps, and we could get a little bit of sugar, a little bit of salt. Sugar was really something we didn’t get very much. A lot of people would make sugar from sugar beets. We did that too, but a lot of people had to eat sugar beets, but we did not have to do that. My dad had pigs. He would kill a pig, which was not allowed, but he would do it. We had our own meat. Dad had chickens, so we had our own eggs. So we did not suffer hunger at all.

Bending the rules and helping out those in need is something that most of the interviewees mentioned. Anne Groenenberg recalled a particularly humorous story. When a group of German soldiers travelled through her town, they demanded cows from

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Anne Groenenberg, June 11, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Anne Groenenberg, June 11, 2013.

a number of families. Since cows were not that rare, Groeneberg's family purchased the oldest cow they could and gave it to the Germans, and kept the healthy cows for themselves.<sup>54</sup>

Having plenty of food in the household made life considerably easier, especially when those who lived in and around the large cities had a very hard time obtaining even basic goods. For example, it was not uncommon for food to be traded for clothing or other necessary items. Groenenberg remembered her father trading sixty pounds of beans so that she could have new eye glasses.<sup>55</sup>

Most of the individuals who were interviewed spoke extensively about doing their best to help those in need during the war. Frances Van Eyk mentioned that her family's protestant Christian beliefs led them to do their best to share what they had. Van Eyk recalls, "We had it good enough so that we could help other people. We had people, two girls from Amsterdam, living with us for six weeks. So they would have food and stay alive. Then when the six weeks were over, we would get another couple."<sup>56</sup> Boarding visitors from the cities for a period of time was common for farm families in the rural areas. Alan Hoekstra, who grew up in the northern province of Friesland, said that he understood that people were going hungry in the cities, but "we were too far away from the big cities. Sometimes people came for food, we gave it to them, and they went home only to lose it to the Germans."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Anne Groenenberg, June 11, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Anne Groenenberg, June 11, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Frances Van Eyk, June 8, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Alan Hoekstra, July 8, 2013.



From the interviews, it was evident that many of those who lived outside the areas that were most affected during the war understood that they were much more fortunate. This is what drove so many to volunteer their homes and food to those who fled. Understanding their own fortune meant they had at least an idea of what life was like in the Netherland's largest cities. Alan Hoekstra's comment demonstrates an understanding of what living in the city was probably like; those who lived in rural areas were not oblivious to the food shortage in the cities. Henk Van Giessen explained that living in a fairly isolated area between a few large rivers was a blessing. South Holland was known for its extensive river networks. Since the majority of the people in his region were small farmers, there was never a worry of hunger. He noted that his family had the "opposite experience" from those living in the cities.<sup>58</sup> Van Giessen did not, however, have a one-sided view of life in the Netherlands during the war. He was able to see life in the city first hand, as it was his job to deliver food to many of his extended family members in Rotterdam. Van Giessen noted, "It was a blessing to not live in the big city during the war...and each time I went I noticed a negative progression. Things were pretty quiet on the streets, buildings were destroyed, and slowly things disappeared from the stores."<sup>59</sup>

Often, rural citizens were forced to house German soldiers or displaced Dutch persons. For most farmers, however, they had no trouble feeding the extra people. Flikweert remembers housing numerous Dutch men forced into work by the Germans along the North Sea.<sup>60</sup> Besides housing migrant workers, the Dutch were often forced to house German soldiers, and on occasion, an officer or two. Henk Van Giessen explained

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Henk Van Giessen, July 13, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Henk Van Giessen, July 13, 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Peter Flikweert, June 23, 2013.

that housing a German officer had numerous advantages. As it has been shown, farmers never lacked food, but the food that was available was never anything special, just the usual meat and potatoes. However, when Van Giessen's parents housed a German officer, the family received extra food. Van Giessen never said whether they received this food from the authorities, or if the officer himself had connections which enabled them to get better food. Either way, having this food highlights the rarity of luxury goods, even in the countryside.<sup>61</sup> Better than average food helped rural citizens stay healthy. As well, the less densely-populated rural areas meant the inhabitants were less susceptible to contagious diseases which were a major problem in the cramped living quarters that many urban Dutch families had to endure during the war.

Peter Flikweert lived both sides of the war experience, at least when it came to food and water. Flikweert told me that lack of food was not really a problem for his family before Zeeland was flooded. However, once his family was forced to different areas of the Netherlands, food became much scarcer.<sup>62</sup>

Overall, despite difficulties at the very end of the war, all those interviewed had enough food to survive. William Van Wely probably summed up the typical experience for the Dutch farmer when he said, "It was people in the North that were still occupied.<sup>63</sup> They were without food, and it was mostly in the big cities. In the farming areas, people could always hide food. For farmers, it was not too bad. I would say some discomfort at times, but not hunger."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with Henk Van Giessen, July 13, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Peter Flikweert, June 23, 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Much of south was liberated prior to the Hunger Winter.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with William Van Wely, August 2, 2013.

*The Relative Lack of Disease in Rural Areas*

All those interviewed expressed gratitude for having lived where they did during World War Two. There was always food or at least, access to food. Although they were aware of the situation in the cities, they lived a fairly comfortable life on their farms. This is in contrast to the experiences in urban areas as described by Van Der Zee and other popular authors.

Van Der Zee recalls a common joke amongst the Dutch citizens during the 1944-45 Hunger Winter. “The German children of 1918 are so grateful for the good food they got in Holland that, in 1945, they give every Dutch child two slices of bread, half a sugar beet and one potato a day.”<sup>65</sup> This was the reality for Van Der Zee and thousands of other people who were stranded in bombed out, disease- ridden cities. By early January 1945, bread rations had been cut from 1000 grams per day, per person to 500 grams, and by February, people were averaging 350 calories per day. This was down from 460 only a month before.<sup>66</sup> Van Der Zee recalls the thoughts of a friend:

Somebody else remembered in particular the faces of the people, ‘sunken, grey and without life’. He went on: ‘We have become paupers. We have no soap and our clothes are worn out. We all look disheveled. Perhaps we believe that only others look so old and that we’re not like them, decrepit little men with collars too wide and sloppy, shiny suits...But one look in the mirror is sufficient. The poverty and anxiety of the last years are imprinted on our faces...And we haven’t laughed for ages.’<sup>67</sup>

In 1946, immediately following the war, Dr. C Banning laid the groundwork for the medical studies that would come in the late 1940s and 1950s. He compiled statistics

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<sup>65</sup> Van Der Zee, *The Hunger Winter*, 145.

<sup>66</sup> Van Der Zee, *The Hunger Winter*, 147.

<sup>67</sup> Van Der Zee, *The Hunger Winter*, 148.

on deaths in the Netherlands during the war. According to Banning, the lack of food in the Netherlands caused an estimated 10,000 deaths, 2,300 of which were in Amsterdam and 2000 in The Hague. Banning estimates that only 1,500 deaths due to malnutrition occurred in the countryside, while 8,500 happened in cities. This is due mainly to the availability of homegrown food on the farms in the east.<sup>68</sup>

Tuberculosis was one of the worst diseases that affected Dutch civilians. Dr. Marc Daniels presented a paper in 1949 describing increasing rates of tuberculosis in Europe during World War Two. Amsterdam had a 208% increase in tuberculosis diagnoses between 1939 and 1945.<sup>69</sup> Nationwide, there was a 102% increase.<sup>70</sup> He cites the Netherlands as a unique example. While most countries saw high tuberculosis rates during the first few years of the war, Holland was hit with increasing rates in the final year of the war, during the Hunger Winter.<sup>71</sup>

Another disease related to the Hunger Winter was typhoid fever. Typhoid fever is highly prevalent in individuals who eat large amounts of contaminated food.<sup>72</sup> It is no surprise then that this would be a problem during a time when good quality food and clean water was scarce. By 1942 and 1943, the Netherlands was experiencing five times more cases of typhoid fever than ever before. The rate was rising at an abnormal pace, which was extremely alarming to the Dutch doctors. In 1939, there were a reported twenty-five deaths from typhoid fever. In 1943, this number had risen to seventy-six.

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<sup>68</sup> C. Banning, "Food Shortage and Public Health, First Half of 1945." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 245 (May 1946), 99.

<sup>69</sup> Dr. Marc Daniels, "Tuberculosis in Europe During and After the Second World War," *The British Medical Journal* 2 (1949), 1065.

<sup>70</sup> C. Banning and Henriette A. Lohr, "Occupied Holland," *The British Medical Journal* 1 (1947), 539.

<sup>71</sup> Daniels, "Tuberculosis in Europe," 1069.

<sup>72</sup> Geoffrey Edsall, "Typhoid Fever," *The American Journal of Nursing* 59 (1959), 990-991.

Unfortunately, data for the number of deaths in 1944 and 1945 are not present, although in 1945 there were 4,848 cases of typhoid fever. Using statistics from 1945 as a basis, it can be assumed that of 400 cases in 1943, seventy-six individuals died then it would not be hard to imagine the death rate in the 1000's for 1945.<sup>73</sup>

The leading causes of disease for the people of Holland, as documented by Dr. Kamp, were a lack of quality food, gas, electricity, and fuel. Netherlanders relied heavily on eating sugar beets and tulip bulbs, and lacked protein in their diets. The deplorable living conditions resulted in poor diets, the leading cause of death among citizens.

These conditions were largely found in the cities, however, not rural areas. For the van Eyk and Van Giessen families, having pork was a major advantage as it gave them a source of protein.<sup>74</sup> In my project, not one interviewee mentioned poverty, hunger, or disease, with the exception of Peter Flikweert. For the most part, they all mentioned the availability of quality food, the ability to trade for necessities such as soap and clothes, and the advantage of living in houses with yards.

In January of 1944, the Germans ordered that the province of Zeeland be flooded; the residents were given advanced notice and told to leave. The Flikweert farm was in the flood zone, which meant they had to leave. Flikweert's family was split up. He went to work for a farmer while his sisters went to live in Rotterdam; while there, one of his sisters contracted diphtheria, and was very sick for an extended period of time. However, she was fortunate enough to get out of the city and move in with her parents in southern

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<sup>73</sup> J.G.G. Brost, "Occupied Holland: Resistance by the Medical Professionals," *The British Medical Journal* 1(1947), 57-59.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Frances Van Eyk, June 8, 2013.  
Interview with Henk Van Giessen, July 13, 2013.

Holland, far away from the large city centers. Flikweert was the only study participant to mention contracting a disease. After leaving the farm in Zeeland, uncontaminated food became much harder to obtain, leaving him with hepatitis at the end of the war.<sup>75</sup>

As they had been aware of famine, those living on the farms were also aware of the rampant disease striking the cities. Flikweert felt the effects of disease directly, but others knew of the problems as well. Groenenberg explained that near the end of the war, she heard about all the deaths in Amsterdam. She heard that caskets were no longer available so instead, bodies were covered in sheets and placed onto pieces of cardboard.<sup>76</sup>

#### *The Lack of Black Market Involvement*

A few farmers made a lot of money during the war selling their goods on the black market. For farmers living farther from urban areas, however, selling goods on the black market did not seem to have been a common practice. Indeed, none of the people who were interviewed for this paper claimed to have been involved in black market trading. One of the main reasons is that there did not seem to be a market for contraband goods within rural communities. Almost everyone had what they needed, or had excess goods to trade for others. Therefore, only those close enough to larger cities and towns could participate in the black market. Henk Van Giessen remembers that food prices increased a little bit during the war, but he could not remember anyone he knew personally who traded in the black market.<sup>77</sup> He remembers one woman who would collect butter coupons to bring to people in Amsterdam, but it was later found out that she

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Peter Flikweert, June 23, 2013.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Anne Groenenberg, June 11, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Henk Van Giessen, July 13, 2013.

had been selling them for profit. It was not common in his area. Like Van Giessen, Alan Hoekstra, who lived in Friesland in the north of the country, thought there was not enough demand to make a large profit where he lived.<sup>78</sup> Many often avoided black market involvement on religious grounds. For Frances Van Eyk, whose family was Protestant, trading contraband was “against my father’s religious and moral values.”<sup>79</sup> Alan Hoekstra’s father also saw the black market as unethical, but was not opposed to trading to get the things his family needed. He would send Alan to the docks to trade butter coupons for coal, since coal was scarce and the Hoekstras had animals to supply them with what they needed.<sup>80</sup>

While those interviewed for this study reported no black market activity, others claim some farmers took advantage of desperate people. In a published account, Johanna Wycoff, who was a teenager living in the Netherland during World War One, wrote in her diary that when they went to get food and clothes from farmers, the price continued to climb. When money was no longer an option, the farmer and his family began demanding jewelry and other items that often had sentimental value<sup>81</sup> There does not seem to be enough literature to determine whether black market involvement was widespread in rural areas, but those who were interviewed for this paper claimed it was not. What cannot be overlooked is the possibility that these are selective memories as participating in the black market is still seen as dishonorable; very few would openly admit to participating. Despite these concerns, black market involvement in and around

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with Alan Hoekstra, July 8, 2013.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Frances Van Eyk, June 8, 2013.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Alan Hoekstra, July 8 2013.

<sup>81</sup> Wycoff, *Dancing in Bomb Shelters*, 10-11.

the largest cities in the Netherlands is discussed in both popular and academic literature in great detail, while very little is ever said about involvement in the most rural of areas.

*Few rural Dutch men taken to Germany*

After the Netherlands surrendered in early 1940, Germany began forcibly taking Dutch men between the ages of 18 and 45 to work in Germany to replace the German men who were fighting in the war. Farmers were often exempt from being taken because they provided Germany with a valuable commodity, food. In a memoir documenting his experiences, Alard Ages expressed his fears of “Arbeitseinsatz”, this practice of forced labour. Ages was particularly worried about being sent away to Germany to work. Ages remembers going to the office to ask for an exemption because of his enrollment in university. He wrote,

I went to the Arbeitseinsatz office in The Hague with the letter...There was a group of men standing around, waiting for an interview. In all my innocence, I headed straight for one of the tables, sat down and showed the letter to the man behind the table...He marked my identification card (Persoonsbewijs in Dutch) with a stamp exempting me from the Arbeitseinsatz and politely sent me on my way...For a while this stamp proved invaluable when I had to pass roadblocks set up by the German police to apprehend unsuspected passersby without an *Ausweis* (stamp) and have them work in camps in Germany or elsewhere.<sup>82</sup>

The benefit of being a student was similar to the benefits extended to farmers. Peter Flikweert explained working in the food industry was an advantage because they were already providing a service to the Germans and therefore it was counter-productive to be sent away to Germany to work in factories. Flikweert told me, “I was outside

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<sup>82</sup>Alard Ages, *Guarded by Angels: Memoir of a Dutch Youth in WW2* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Tafford Publishing 2007), 62.



Rotterdam, and usually they didn't come into that area. We had something going for us because we grew food. I was working in the greenhouse."<sup>83</sup> Ironically, it was Flikweert himself who ended up being the exception to this. He worked in a greenhouse just outside Rotterdam, and had avoided earlier German roundups of Dutch workers. However, as the war went on, and the Germans needed more labourers, they finally entered the greenhouse where Flikweert was working. Flikweert recalled, "But the one time they came outside anyways, outside the city. And they went between the rows of tomatoes that grew up to the roof. We were laying between the rows. The soldiers came down every row, and they would gather you out in the street and they would take you away in groups."<sup>84</sup>

William Van Wely also used farming to avoid being taken to serve in the Dutch Army prior to their surrender. Van Wely's father asked the Dutch government to delay William's entrance into the army so that he could help on the farm in the time of need. By the time William would have been eligible to fight, the Netherlands had already surrendered.<sup>85</sup>

Aside from Flikweert, who was taken to work in Germany, very few of the interviewees remember losing friends, neighbors, or family members to the Germans. Raids typically were focused on the larger city areas of Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht, and the Hague. It seemed that the only interest the Germans had with farmers was taking their animals and crops, not their sons and husbands. Anne Groenenberg remembered

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Peter Flikweert, June 23, 2013.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Peter Flikweert, June 23, 2013.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with William Van Wely, August 2, 2013.

losing a cow to the Germans<sup>86</sup> and Alan Hoekstra recalled having to bring the Germans a shipment of hay once per year.<sup>87</sup>

### *Lack of Hostility Toward the Germans*

Depending on their particular experiences during the war, citizens of the Netherlands had different opinions of the Germans. Bob Moore examines two different types of people, the resisters and the collaborators.<sup>88</sup> Collaborators often had economic or political reasons to side with the Germans, while resisters worked to uphold the Netherlands independence and freedom. Those that participated in this study seemed to belong to a third group of people which Moore briefly describes as being indifferent towards the Germans. They may have harbored internal disdain, but outwardly upheld a veil of indifference.<sup>89</sup>

Alan Hoekstra noted that his family did not feel the effects of the Hunger Winter because they lived too far from the major cities. The relatively comfortable lifestyle of those in rural areas may have contributed to a less hostile reaction to the Germans. Alan remembered a number of German sympathizers who lived in his small village. While his family did not agree, Hoekstra explained, “My family was not a sympathizer, but there was no hard feeling towards those that did sympathize. We treated it as a difference of opinion.” Hoekstra went on to explain that the Germans were rarely seen, and that day to

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<sup>86</sup>Interview with Anne Groenening, June 11, 2013.

<sup>87</sup>Interview with Alan Hoekstra, July 8, 2013.

<sup>88</sup>Bob Moore, “Occupation, Collaboration and Resistance: Some Recent Publications on the Netherlands during the Second World War,” *European History Quarterly* 21 (1991).

<sup>89</sup>Moore, “Occupation, Collaboration and Resistance,” 109-118.

day life was not greatly affected, especially when it came to attending school.<sup>90</sup> Henk Van Giessen shared similar stories. Of the Germans, Henk said, “In general, the Germans were good guys. We didn’t like them, but they were normal people like we were.” A high ranking German officer who stayed with Van Giessen’s family was a Christian, and close contact was kept with him throughout the war as there seemed to be common ground founded on Christianity.<sup>91</sup> These two examples are not meant to dismiss any hostility from rural citizens. However, from the small sample in this study, it seems as if resentment of the Germans was situational, rather than something that carried on throughout the war. Van Giessen, for example, remembers seeing a Dutch plane being shot down near his home. When they ran to inspect the damage, they saw a Dutch soldier with his face blown off, prompting Van Giessen to express that he was “very angry.”<sup>92</sup> Despite this situation however, Van Giessen explained his view of the Germans in this way:

You know, the hatred that we had for Germans and I can’t call it hatred, but it was still...if a game takes place, like a soccer game, I hope they beat the Germans! On the other hand, I think the German people are a very intelligent and industrial people. Today again you can see that, as they are the strength of Europe.<sup>93</sup>

Peter Flikweert also had mixed opinions on the Germans. He conceded that living during the war was not always that bad. However, he did feel that the Germans flooded Zeeland out of spite, as there did not seem to be any military advantage to doing this. When asked about how people felt about the Germans, Flikweert said, “We often ignored

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with Alan Hoekstra, July 8, 2013.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Henk Van Giessen, July 13, 2013.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Henk Van Giessen, July 13, 2013.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Henk Van Giessen, July 13, 2013.

them. Often they did nothing to us, and we did nothing to them. I think because we were in Eastern Holland, but outside the big city, that we didn't deal with a lot of the hardships that others dealt with. We were not sympathizing." He did note, however, that there were a number of people who did want to side with the Germans, but aside from those looking for the Germans' favour, this seemed to be limited to older individuals who could remember the Boer War and had little empathy for the British.<sup>94</sup>

What the interviews have shown is that there seems to be a connection between living in rural areas of the Netherlands and not having an outright hatred for the Germans. Many of those interviewed for this project either lived near the German border, or spent time housing German soldiers, and fostered connections with them. Many of the Dutch that lived during the war will tell you that the German soldiers were not actually bad people, but were a lot like themselves. Something can also be said for the passage of time. World War Two has been over for many years, and as is common in many situations, time can heal many wounds.

### *Why Canada?*

The liberation of the Netherlands began in September of 1944, but attempts by both the Americans and the British, along with a handful of Canadians, came up short. It was not until May of 1945 that the First Canadian Army moved into the Netherlands and entered the key cities of Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam. The task of liberating the Netherlands was never easy. One particular battle at Scheldt cost the First Canadian

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Peter Flikweert, June 23, 2013.

Army almost 6,500 soldiers. However, this heroic feat by Canadian soldiers forged a relationship that lasts to this day.<sup>95</sup>

Dutch citizens are, and were, incredibly grateful for the sacrifice made by Canadian soldiers. In thankfulness, the Dutch government still sends 20,000 tulip bulbs to Ottawa every May, which has allowed the Canadian Government and the City of Ottawa to put on an annual tulip festival. Thankfulness was also there in 1945, as is shown in the following newspaper editorial. When the Canadian soldiers left the Netherlands, a young female editor read a letter she had written, but it was in Dutch, which few of the Canadian soldiers would have understood. However, eight months later, a translated version of this letter was printed in the *Hamilton Spectator*. She wrote,

You couldn't understand...the sufferings which we had to bear during five years, the suffering from which thousands of men, women, and children went to rack and ruin...You didn't know...the torment of the German occupation during five years that was finished when you came...We are no more hungry, since we started to eat your biscuits and now we eat tarts again...we have...food for our children. That was your work.<sup>96</sup>

As has been noted earlier, Frans Schryer cited a number of reasons why many Dutch citizens chose to immigrate to Canada, such as trauma after the war, the desire to leave because friends and family left, increased socialism in the Netherlands, and a lack of quality farm land for the Netherlands growing rural population.<sup>97</sup> The people interviewed for this project went to Canada for many of these reasons. The main reason for leaving, however, was the availability of land. Anne Groenberg noted that one of

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<sup>95</sup> Peter Moogk, "The Netherlands and Canada: A Wartime Love Affair," *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 27 (2006).

<sup>96</sup> Anneke Klein Klouwenberg, "When They Asked Who Freed Us: A Moving Goodbye to Canadians from a Dutch Editor Who Speaks from the Heart." *Hamilton Spectator*, March 25, 1946.

<sup>97</sup> Schryer, *The Netherlandic Presence in Ontario*, 48-52.

the reasons her family left was because of a lack of space, although she hinted at being tricked into believing Canada was much better than it really was. Groenenberg said,

I was one of eight kids, and there wasn't enough farms for everyone. Canada wanted farm workers, and it was far away from the communists. You had an idea that you would end up on a nice big farm on the prairies. It was a thing to do. What else was there? Most of the people I know went to North America. The war also played a part. There was no room!<sup>98</sup>

Like Groenenberg, Frances van Eyk's father also saw Canada as a chance at getting his hands on good land; van Eyk mentioned that when they arrived in Canada, they knew they had a good future and they "were not disappointed."<sup>99</sup> Henk Van Giessen remembers a friend who moved to Brandon, Manitoba, and heard a lot about Canada through him. He told me, "Canadians were very much appreciated by the Dutch because of their liberty, so I very strongly felt that I should go to Canada over other places. So despite Jane being in the States, there was an appreciation for Canada and Canadians. This was felt by many people." Van Giessen's wife's family moved to the United States instead of to Canada; however, after Van Giessen and his wife were married, her family saw that in Canada "there was more land, better prices, and more opportunity"<sup>100</sup> and moved to Canada themselves. This was a sentiment shared by many Dutch immigrants when they decided on Canada as a possible destination.

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Ann Groenenberg, June 11, 2013.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Frances Van Eyk, June 8, 2013.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Henk Van Giessen, July 13, 2013.

## **Conclusion**

Although the wartime experiences of those who lived in the major cities of the Netherlands are well known, this paper examined an alternative experience of war that has been overlooked. Stories of these rural Dutch immigrants are in many ways ordinary, yet they shed light on a war experience that needs to be examined. The popular historical narrative on the Netherlands is that life was tough, food was scarce, and disease was almost guaranteed. Yet, growing up and hearing the stories of Dutch immigrants in Chatham-Kent, Ontario, a narrative that formed in my own mind was nothing like what was written in textbooks and taught in high school and post-secondary institutions. I heard about a war experience which was frightening, but not terrifying, and one that was physically and mentally tough, but not deadly.

A number of things were made clear through the research and interviews. These people lived in rural areas, often far away from the major cities of the Netherlands. Throughout the war, they always seemed to have enough to eat, although lamented the fact that there were few luxuries. With their excess food, many of the families were able to trade for the items they needed, often allowing them to avoid a tainted reputation by participating in the black market. The ability to trade for items such as clothes and soap, as well as the availability of protein, meant that malnutrition was less likely, and therefore, harmful diseases were infrequent. It appears as if these individuals lived a far less stress filled life than those who lived in the cities. Even the outright hatred for the Germans that was very prevalent in the cities was not as pronounced in rural areas.

The value of examining this different life during the war is that it helps make sense of the people who came to Canada, what they did when they first arrived, and what

contribution they made to Canada, especially in agriculture. These immigrants have helped shape society in different ways, as Frans Schryer has highlighted in many of his books. There is still more, however, to learn about the Dutch immigrants who came by the thousands to southern Ontario in the years after the war, as the sample size used for this paper only represent a very small percentage of people who came to Canada.

Regardless of sample size, this paper has shown that the experiences of rural inhabitants in the Netherlands were much different than those of urban dwellers. That is not to say that there was no lasting impact for these individuals. This paper has shown that the war affected them in a very different way. The struggle for rural residents did not generally revolve around hunger, disease, and death. The impact on rural citizens seemed to come after the war, via mass migration out of the Netherlands. The war experience continues to be a major milestone in the lives of those interviewed for this project as can be seen in their yearly celebrations of the liberation of the Netherlands. Their willingness to participate in this study also shows their desire to see their stories live on, to educate and influence an entirely new generation of Canadians of Dutch descent. The war provided insight into who these people were, their cultural identity, and how their experiences have shaped their lives in Canada.

This paper exposes the one sided historical narrative that is present in the literature in English about the Netherlands during World War Two. The stories told by these six Dutch immigrants helps provide a broader picture of war experiences in the Netherlands. It also provides insight into the lives of the Dutch immigrants who made Canada their home. Hopefully, this paper acts as a stepping stone for further investigation of the experiences of the Dutch during World War Two. Perhaps more



Dutch immigrants to Canada will recognize the value of their life and the importance it had on shaping Canada, and perhaps will be more willing to discuss their war experience or write about it in personal memoirs. As Henk Van Giessen pointed to me: “It is a lot of experiences that you will never forget. Things before the war and after the war, even my first 10 years in Canada. You seem to forget things, but the war is something that stays in your mind.”

## Appendix A

### Questions for Interviews

#### Daily Life

1. When were you born?
2. What can you remember of life before the war?
  - a. Where did you live?
  - b. How did your family make a living?
  - c. Did you attend school?
3. Do you remember what life was like when the Nazi's arrived in the Netherlands?
4. What can you tell me about German Occupation?
  - a. Was there enough food for you and your family?
    - i. How did your family cope with the aftermath of the Hunger Winter?
  - b. Were you still able to attend school?
  - c. Were you able to go out shopping?
  - d. Did you know about the underground black market for specific goods?
    - i. What can you tell me about the underground market?
    - ii. Did your family participate in it?

#### During the War

1. What events can you remember from the war?
2. What was your primary way of receiving news?
  - a. Newspapers?
  - b. Radios?
  - c. Local officials?
  - d. Nazis?
3. Can you recall anything of the resistance movement?
  - a. Was your family actively involved in the resistance movement?
4. Do you remember anyone being sent away to Germany or Poland to work in occupation camps?
5. What do you remember of the period of liberation?

## Attitudes to War, Occupation, and Liberation

1. What can you tell me about how individuals felt about German occupation?
  - a. Were people surprised that the Netherlands fell so quickly, or was it expected?
2. How did people feel about the Dutch Royal family? Did they do an adequate job alerting citizens of the German attack.
  - a. How did people react to the Dutch Royal Family leaving the Netherlands to live in Britain?
3. What was the general feeling during occupation?
  - a. Worried?
  - b. Hopeful?

## Post-War

1. Did the war have an effect on you in anyway? If so, in what way?
  - a. Are you open to talking about your experiences during the war?
  - b. Does it still bother you to think about it?
2. What made your family decide to move to Canada?
  - a. Where did you move?
  - b. Why did you move?
  - c. How did you get to Canada? Where you sponsored?
    - i. Did you receive sponsorship through the Christian Reformed Church of Canada?
  - d. What occupation did your family take up in Canada?
  - e. Do you know why your family chose Canada over other popular destinations such as Australia and South Africa?
3. Do you know if Canada was a popular destination of choice for many Dutch immigrants?
4. Looking back on the situation now, are you happy with your family's decision to leave the Netherlands and to come to Canada?
  - a. Have you considered moving back? If not, what keeps you here?
  - b. Do you still have family in the Netherlands?
    - i. Why or why did they not leave the Netherlands after WWII?

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