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Under the floorboards

Greg Sennema

My grandfather Theo Polman (1904-1965) maintained a daily diary for his entire adult life, recording both banal and dramatic events that occurred in and around his home in Groningen. In reading and rereading his diary – in particular the dark years of Nazi occupation – I have become intimately familiar with the quotidian details of his life as a tobacco-store owner, as a doting husband to his homemaker wife, and as a caring father to his son and daughter (my mother). Theo's descriptions of tangible objects including heirlooms or food items are easily detectable in my own upbringing as a second-generation immigrant growing up in Canada. Between the lines of the details, however, I also recognize a number of abstract attributes of Theo's Dutch and Reformed world that were present in my upbringing. In this article, I have begun what I suspect will be a life-long process of unpacking these abstractions, and how they may have contributed to my own worldview.

Key terms: Diary; immigrants; identity; memory; Dutch-Canadian culture; World War II.

Although I lived with my parents for the first twenty-three years of my life, I only discerned their distinct Dutch accents after I married and moved away. Of course, there were other attributes of my Dutch heritage that I could identify, easily named by thousands of other Dutch-Canadian immigrant children: *oliebollen* ('dumplings'), *sjoelbak* ('shuffleboard'), *stampot* ('potato and vegetable stew'), *dropjes* ('black licorice'), to name just a few. But I did not detect my parents' accents. Over the course of the subsequent twenty-three years, while visiting my parents with my wife and two children, I began to perceive that, just like their accents, there were other – but less visible – Dutch attributes that influenced my upbringing as a second-generation immigrant. More recently, my perspective has been enormously enriched by my maternal *Opa's* ('grandfather's') thoughts as expressed in the *dagboek* ('journal') he maintained for much of his life. Hidden beneath the floorboards of his home in Groningen during World War II, his

dagboek reveals to me some of the mores and values that have helped shape my worldview.

The secure and *gezellig* ('cozy') world I inhabited as a child was a microcosm of the Dutch and Reformed church world inhabited by my parents and grandparents in mid-twentieth-century Holland. Virtually all my classmates at my Hamilton, Ontario Reformed Christian elementary school were children of recent Dutch immigrants – parents who, I later realized, also had strong Dutch accents. A highlight of the annual school bazaar was watching our seventh-grade teacher lower a shimmering, pickled herring into his upturned mouth while standing in the middle of a gym filled with students, parents and grandparents eating plates of *boerenkool met rookworst* ('kale stew with smoked sausage'). When I was not at school, I was likely at our Christian Reformed Church a few evenings each week, and twice on Sundays. My parents' social group was largely comprised of fellow émigrés, and my father was employed at the head office of a lumber yard owned by a Dutch immigrant family. After immigrating to Canada in 1963, my parents maintained a close connection with the Netherlands, and each year either one of them would return to Holland to visit family.

My perspective of this microcosm began to shift after I entered a public high school, and befriended teenagers my parents referred to as "Canadians," that is, non-Dutch. Many of these friends were also second-generation immigrants, but whose parents had emigrated from Italy, Greece, Germany, Scotland, or Vietnam. Over time, my exposure to non-Dutch customs, foods, and religious faiths caused me to recognize additional attributes of my Dutch and Reformed heritage. For example: I learned that *Ere zij God* ('Glory to God') was not a well-known Christmas carol; that *chocolade hagelslag* ('chocolate sprinkles') were not a common sandwich topping; or that from among 1,000 students in my high school, I was likely the only one memorizing a "Lord's Day" from the Heidelberg Catechism each Tuesday evening. School friends who came over to my house would ask me questions about Dutch artefacts that graced every table and shelf, and about the large painting of Groningen that dominated our living room. I can still hear my *Italian* friend recite, in his best Swedish-sounding Dutch accent, the words of the LP album that sat against our living-room stereo: *Hier ik kom met al mijn noden* ('Here I come with all my needs'). After which he asked: "Why do the Dutch have so many nuts?"

Of course, some of my high school friends were female, and soon the prospect of actually marrying "a Canadian" entered my mind, and eventually became a reality. As she joined our family events, my wife would apprise me of some of our customs, and even today when I asked her to reflect on what these Dutchisms were, she produced a list of ten items within thirty seconds (for

example, why do Dutch people insist on serving large pieces of *gebak* ('cake') using doll-housed sized plates and forks?).



Figure 1. My family's kitchen ca. 1970, complete with faux Dutch tile wallpaper, and a purple hanging flowerpot purchased on a trip to Holland and transported back to Canada full of dropjes ('salty black licorice').

Since graduating from University in the mid 1990's, I have read books and articles that have helped shape my perspective of my Dutch heritage and upbringing, including what may have motivated my parents and so many of their countrymen to immigrate to Canada after World War II. For example, Herman Ganzevoort suggests in *A bittersweet land* (1988) that so many Dutch people equated their freedom from Nazi oppression "with the arrival of the Canadians," and "while communication was difficult, the Dutch were generally impressed by the

behaviour, good manners, and generosity of their liberators. People who had lived with shortages since [...] the beginning of the war, were overwhelmed by the apparent affluence of the Canadian soldiers” (1988, 64). I recognize some of the immigrant experiences retold in Van der Mey’s *To all our children* (1983), which describes the hardships and joys experienced by so many families during their migration and when setting up a new life in Canada. In his autobiographical book *Becoming Canadian*, Michael Horn (1997) describes his own life-long process of assimilation after immigrating from the Netherlands to Canada at the age of twelve. And through the stories retold in Anne van Arragon Hutten’s *Uprooted: The story of Dutch immigrant children to Canada, 1947-1959* (2001), I read about the high financial and emotional costs of moving one’s family to a new country.



Figure 2. The Polman family go for a walk with friends while on vacation at Schipborg in 1943. Theo is lying on the ground at the bottom left. Bep is in the centre, with daughter Nelly on her lap, and son Aldert standing at the top left.

In addition to describing the joys and sorrows of the immigration experience, most of these sources include experiences of life during World War II, such as the grief of concentration camps, the anxiety of resistance, and the quotidian activities of life under a Nazi regime. In the Dutch language, the word “*egodocument*” is used to describe this type of autobiographical writing. This term was introduced by Jacques Presser, a Dutch Jewish teacher dismissed from his post during the Nazi occupation, and refers to “texts in which an author writes about his or her own acts, thoughts and feelings” (Dekker 2002, 7). Egodocuments lift “individuals out of the maelstrom of history by endowing ordinary lives with agency, dignity, and texture” (Lindemann 2001, 9).

When I look through my collection of black-and-white family photographs taken during the war – where my *Opa* lounges on vacation in a wool suit – it is difficult to comprehend the *agency* or *texture* of my parents’ and grandparents’ lives. The photographs often raise more questions than answers. Were the smiles on their faces short-lived, wiped clean by yet another instance of Nazi brutality? What did they do or say immediately after these photos were taken? What, besides blood, actually connects me to these people and the lives that they led? In addition to a handful of photos of my grandparents, I consider myself extremely fortunate that I have access to my *Opa*’s daily thoughts contained in his *dagboek*, an *egodocument* that answers many questions I didn’t even know I had, and which imbues “agency, dignity, and texture” into the lives of my mother and her parents. My *Opa* describes the ordinary minutiae of the conventional life he and his family lead during World War II; but more significantly, he unintentionally reveals a rich context, which helps contextualize aspects of my Dutch heritage and upbringing that has influenced how I conduct myself, and where my interests lie.

Throughout most of his adult life, Theodore (Theo) Polman (1904-1965) wrote daily entries into his *dagboek*. After his death, the *dagboek* collection went first to my uncle, and in 1987 my mother brought the diaries to Canada. Since then, the entire set of journals occupies a specially-made glass case in my parents’ Hamilton home. While studying history at university in the early 1990’s, I began to take an interest in what my *Opa* wrote. The tight handwriting and Dutch language made it difficult for me to digest, so I was pleased when my mother agreed to translate a portion of the diaries – the war years – starting with the German invasion on that bright spring morning of May 10, 1940, to Liberation Day on May 5, 1945. Over the next twenty years my mother translated the daily entries, first on paper, then on a computer. Together with my mother and father, I edited her translation and packaged it into a 390-page hardcover volume. To date I have read the 344,000 words of this English translation three times, and through each reading I am thoroughly engaged.



Figure 3. Theo Polman standing proudly alongside his dagboek collection, ca. 1963.

Theo lived in the northern city of Groningen, and owned a tobacco store and home near the city centre. According to my mother, his brothers – one a medical doctor, and the other the theologian Andries Derk Rietema Polman – helped set Theo up with the store since he (like this author) was afflicted with congenital cataracts, and had already lost his right eye following surgery in 1915. Theo married Albertina (Bep) Ritburg in 1930, and together they had two children: Aldert (1934-2017) and my mother, Nelly (b. 1938). Despite his poor eyesight, Theo was able to function as a caring husband, father, son, merchant, and church member. Theo's war-time resistance activities were limited by his poor eyesight, and his doctor

brother advised that he should not become an *onderduiker* ('underdiver')¹ by avoiding the forced labour draft,² since his condition made it likely he would already get an exemption, and moreover he would "be taking the space of somebody who really needs it" (Polman, 29 Sep 1944). Theo passively and actively resisted in other ways: by hiding contraband, listening to his hidden radio, temporarily taking in *onderduikers*, and, most consistently, by delivering the illegal *Trouw* newspaper. My mother suggests he was exceptionally good at this role, since his poor eyesight augmented his ability to sneak around a blacked-out Groningen. Theo even hid his reading and writing habits from the authorities: "I started reading a book about the family of Orange, by [...] Eelco van Kleffens. The Germans should not find out about this, since it is on the list of forbidden books. As far as that goes, they better not find these journals either and after every use I hide them very carefully" (Polman, July 30 1942).



Figure 4. Theo Polman in 1941.

¹ A colloquial term for a person in hiding.

² In German: *Arbeitseinsatz*. Civilians in Nazi-occupied countries were rounded up to be sent to Germany as forced labourers in German factories and agriculture. The work could also involve, as was the case for my *Opa*, digging defense works to thwart the liberating allied forces.



Figure 5. Theo Polman writing in his dagboek, ca. 1960.

Despite descriptions of despair, outrage, and stress, I delight in my *Opa's* warm portrayal of his family. After my *Oma* ("Grandmother") Bep had returned from a three-week hospital stay in February 1942, he writes: "I don't know who is happiest that mother is back home, the children or I!" Theo describes how he and Bep read stories to their children, took them for walks and bicycle trips throughout the city, and played with Aldert and his model train set. Theo describes returning by train to Groningen with Nelly, and she "played with the cardboard train tickets, pressing them against the windows where they soaked up condensation and when thoroughly wet, took them apart and made 'sandwiches' for us to enjoy" (Polman, 18 Jan 1944). Theo and Bep also doled out tough love, with regular spankings for infractions including bedwetting, or going outside without shoes. On one occasion Nelly was so slow in eating her dinner that Bep poured her pudding dessert over her potatoes. I imagine the twinkle in Theo's one eye as he relates that "I could not help smirking a little bit and she said: 'what's so funny?'"



Figure 6. Theo advertises the opening of his new store (“Advertisement” 1938, 12).

This story reminds me how uniquely fortunate I am to have detailed descriptions of my mother as a child, and to catch glimpses of her outside of our own mother-son relationship. For example, Theo reports on Nelly's antics: “When mother scolded her and reminded her that she had to ask permission to get out of bed, the little imp said: ‘How could I, you were far away in the kitchen!’” (Polman, 17 May 1941). Or when “the children played indoors. They entertained themselves with a couple of empty cigar boxes, or at least Aldert did. Nelly had taken a few boxes that were still full, and when I caught her she had a cigar hanging from her lips” (Polman, 17 Oct 1941). Theo describes Nelly as “our thumb sucker” (my mother also called me this), and writes of her vivid dreams and nightmares, a presage that as an adult, Nelly would continue to wake her husband and children with her nightmares.

Through his illegal radio and clandestine newspapers, Theo was keenly aware of the news from within the Netherlands and throughout the world. He writes often about Princess Juliana and her daughters living in Canada, and frequently comments on a good friend who had emigrated to Canada before the war. As the liberation forces drew near, Theo learned from customers and from the news on his hidden radio³ about the progress of the *Canadezen* (‘Canadians’)

³ Theo kept his illegal radio hidden underneath a coal pile in the cellar. A friend did some wiring so that Theo and Bep could listen from the comfort of the main floor, although they had to take care that their children did not hear. On March 23, 1945, Theo wrote: “When we listened to Radio

as they raced northwards from the liberated south, finally arriving at the south end of Groningen on April 13, 1945. By April 15 they had seen their first Canadians, snipers on neighbouring rooftops, and then later when they utilized Wasp flamethrowers to rout the *Moffen* ('Krauts') from the *Noorderplantsoen* ('Northern city park') across the street from their home.

Despite the constant shooting that caused Nelly to creep into her parents' bed ("*Nelly is van angst in ons bed gekropen!*") and the resulting destruction to parts of the city, Theo and his family were overjoyed to finally gain their freedom. He describes standing at the door and watching both the revellers as well as the NSB⁴ traitors paraded along the street, including a "man, walking in slippers and his wife wearing a fur coat [...] mocked and ridiculed from all sides" (Polman, 16 April 1945). Bep promptly placed an orange bow in Nelly's hair and sashes around her children's waists. "We have waited five long years for this moment and now it is really here!"

Theo and his family were thrilled to see the Canadians. Nelly and Aldert, using English phrases written down for them by a neighbour girl, walked the neighbourhood hoping to receive gum or chocolate handouts from the soldiers. One time, Nelly "got a slice of white bread with a big piece of cheese. She had never tasted white bread and thought it was cake. She also got an English cigarette, 'for your father.'" (Polman, 4 May 1945). Nelly often "played in the park, around, and with, Canadian soldiers." Theo writes that his family attended a church service for Canadian soldiers, and that "even though we could not understand a word [...] it was interesting to watch." Yet, as Michiel Horn points out, "the Canadians were not saints; they were mostly young men who had fought, faced death, and lived" (Horn 1981, 158). Theo writes that a Canadian soldier had stolen his sister-in-law's purse full of jewelry, that soldiers were often intoxicated, and that many young women, previously in the company of Germans, were now seen hanging off the Canadians. Horn points out that despite this, any resentment "soon vanished after the Canadians left [the Netherlands in 1946] while the gratitude remained" (Horn 1981, 171). My parents are two of the more than 184,000 Dutch immigrants who came to Canada between 1946 and 1982 (Van der Mey 1983, 53).

Orange in the evening, after the children were in bed, it was kind of loud. Aldert could apparently hear and cried: "Mother, radio!" But I immediately reassured him and called out that there were Germans walking by."

⁴ The *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging in Nederland* ('The National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands') was the Dutch fascist party.



Figure 7. Nelly wearing an orange dress on Liberation Day, May 1945.

Beyond the description of family life during the stressful Nazi occupation, I sometimes sense I am catching glimpses of my own childhood in Canada, and of my parents' outlook and approach to life. The material comparisons are easy to identify, such as the frequent references to food. Theo's description of family meals is not so different to how I would describe the food my parents provided to my siblings and me: *poffert*,⁵ *koek* ('ginger cake'), raisin bread, strawberries served on bread, Brussels sprouts, endive, pea soup, liverwurst, marrow fats with bacon, *karnemelkse pap* ('buttermilk porridge'), and, of course, potatoes. Our weekly groceries included items that could only be found in the local Dutch store. And upon returning from their annual trips to Holland, they presented their children with candy and other Dutch knick-knacks.⁶ In addition to food, our tables and shelves were decorated with many of the items my *opa* refers to in his *dagboek*, such as a letter weigh-scale, a metal hot water bottle, a gift necklace for Bep, and

⁵ A cake unique to the province of Groningen, cooked in a special pan surrounded by hot water.

⁶ I still have the modernized *knijpkat* ('dyno torch') that my mother brought home in 1978. She told us that they used this type of hand-powered flashlight during the war, although my brother and I found it hard to imagine hiding from the Nazis with such a noisy contraption.

even a doll my mother received for her third birthday. The stories of these items were repeated throughout my youth, and I continue to hear them as my parents tell the same stories to their third-generation Dutch immigrant grandchildren.

In addition to these material manifestations of my Dutch heritage, there are other, less tangible aspects of my upbringing that I recognized within the *dagboek*. For example, the tough love doled out by my *Opa* and *Oma* was likely reflected in my own mother's style of parenting. Often recalled at family gatherings are my mother's words to me when, at six years old, I bit my brother's arm: "If you are going to act like a dog, then we'll have to treat you like a dog," before proceeding to tie me to the kitchen fridge with kite string. I'm pretty certain – or at least a little hopeful – she had a twinkle in her eye just as Theo might have when punishing his daughter. Theo also describes that as a child, Nelly sang incessantly. While visiting a relative for tea, "Nelly had to use the bathroom. She was singing so loud that we could hear her all the way in the sun room" (22 May 1941). Singing was a trait that my mother carried on into adulthood. I recall her constantly singing, whistling, or humming throughout the day – although the tunes were more likely from *Hier ik kom met all mijn noden*, and not *Wir fahren gegen Engeland* ('We are sailing against England'), a song Theo writes Nelly learned from the German soldiers at the beginning of the Nazi occupation. Theo also writes that as she played in the streets surrounding their home, Nelly would go to the "bathroom in the air raid shelters because she was too busy playing to come home." I now wonder if my mother had memories of this when she scolded me (when I was five years old) for a similar transgression, mine involving an empty yellow margarine container tucked behind our backyard shed. And finally, I feel a distinct connection with Theo as he confirms the *jammer genoeg* ('unfortunate') detection of cataracts in the eyes of his eight-year-old son in 1942, a confirmation my mother had when I was born in 1969, and one that I had when my second son was born in 2001. For many years, I needed to walk to the front of the classroom to read the blackboard, a hardship shared with my *Oom* ('uncle') Aldert, described in the *dagboek*.

Some of Theo's war-time routines described in the *dagboek* – covertly grinding wheat into flour, or daily picking up milk in a metal hot water bottle concealed beneath his coat and strapped to his back – were fortunately not present in my own family's life in Canada. Other habits, including sewing homemade clothes, taking Sunday afternoon walks, and habitually following the morning coffee and tea schedule (tea with breakfast, coffee at 10am, tea at 3pm, coffee before dinner, tea at 8pm), were – and in some cases still are – present. Theo's description of their Reformed church and religious life is extremely similar to what I experienced in Canada: annual home visitations with our elder; morning and evening Sunday church services; church services on both Christmas Day and

New Year's Day; and after dinner devotions – although our devotion time was never skipped because the “roar of planes [English bombers on their way to Germany] was so deafening” (Polman, 9 Oct 1943). As was the case in my own childhood, minor lapses in the Sabbath rest rules were discussed and eventually tolerated by Theo and Bep. “Mother cycled,” Theo wrote, “to have a look at the picture a street photographer had taken of Nelly in her pretty dress, when she walked with mother to the cemetery on Sunday. Mother could not resist buying it, despite the fact it had been taken on a Sunday!” (Polman, 2 Sep 1942).



Figure 8. The photo of Nelly taken on a Sunday in 1942.

I also recognize many of the leisure and holiday activities described in the *dagboek*. Theo often played games with his children, family, and friends, reminding me of the countless hours spent with my *Oma* connecting dots playing the pen and paper “SOS game” during one of her frequent visits to Canada. Some of the more memorable descriptions of Theo’s family life involve celebrating *Sinterklaas* (‘St. Nicholas Day’). While my own parents did not precisely follow the December 5th present-giving tradition, aspects of the event made it into our annual routine. Placing carrots in the wooden shoes by the *kachel* (‘woodstove’) to feed *Sinterklaas*’ horse in exchange for a small gift, receiving a chocolate letter

(for the initial of our first name), and of course the secrecy of the presents given the evening before.



Figure 9. Bep Polman sitting in her daughter's living room in 1985, beneath a painting of Groningen and surrounded by Dutch artefacts.

Theo's description of their *Sinterklaas* celebrations in 1943 – a period in Aldert's life when he started to doubt the existence of *Sinterklaas* – is particularly heartwarming. After Theo had left to go on an "errand" in the city, the children

were in our living room and suddenly heard a tinkling noise coming from the bedroom. When they looked, they saw *pepernoten* [small and round spice cookies] scattered all over the floor. Nelly was afraid and looked on from a safe distance. When she looked up, she said: "Oh no!" and sure enough, a parcel attached to a rope was coming down through the ventilation shaft. More parcels followed until there was a present for everybody: a book and an agenda for father; mother got a new purse, a food masher, a cheese slicer and a package of (real) tea; Aldert got a book, a game and an ink blotter and Nelly got a doll, the game Tiddlywinks, crayons and a colouring book. When Aldert saw the presents descending slowly, he kept on shouting: "Sing, sing, we have to sing the Santa songs!" And although he does not believe in Santa anymore, he sang the loudest! Nelly did not sing; it was too overwhelming for her; she was scared and was white around her nose. When I came home from my "errand," the children told me what had happened, and that they were sorry I had missed it all! We let them stay out of bed an hour longer, and when it finally was time to go, they were apprehensive to walk through the dark corridor to go to the

bathroom. Aldert was too wound up to sleep, and when we went to bed at 11 p.m., he was still awake [...] and when mother said: “Don’t tell me you do, after all, believe in Sinterklaas?” he said: “I believe in this one, he was for real!”
(Polman, 5 Dec 1943)

Row	Score	Result
1	1-0	2-1
2	0-1	
3	1-0	2-3
4	0-1	
5	1/2-1/2	
6	1-0	2-2
7	1/2-1/2	
8	0-1	
9	1-0	3-1
10	1/2-1/2	
11	1-0	
12	1/2-1/2	
13	0-1	
14	1-0	
15	0-1	
16	0-1	1
17	1-0	1-0
18	0-1	
19	0-1	3-1
20	1-0	
21	0-1	
22	1-0	
23	0-1	1-2
24	1-0	
25	0-1	1-3
26	1-0	

Figure 10. Theo kept detailed scores for his checker tournaments, this one from July 1944. My Oma and I would keep a similar tally sheet for our “SOS game” tournaments.

Like many of the *dagboek* entries, this *Sinterklaas* passage is interesting to me from an historical point of view. In his descriptions of commonplace events, Theo continually refers to aspects of life that were a result of the Nazi occupation, in this case the reference to “real” tea – typically only ersatz tea could be purchased with their ration coupons. Theo’s *dagboek* illustrates how one Dutch family coped during the war: children shivering in their classroom since there was not enough heating coal; adults bartering or scrounging for food, or chopping trees down for heating fuel; and everyone at times crying, trembling, rejoicing, and praying. Theo would often describe his personal feelings and opinions about his family’s living conditions, about the actions (or inactions) of fellow countrymen, about his

church connections, and about the progress of the war. The *dagboek* is now part of my growing collection of books, articles, memoirs, and diaries pertaining to Dutch war-time experiences and the postwar Dutch immigration experience.



Figure 11. Theo Polman ca. 1964.

The photos that I have of my *Opa* Theo seem to emphasize the distance between the “then” and “now” of our relationship. What could I possibly have in common with the Theo Polman I see sitting at a typewriter corresponding with who knows who about who knows what? His mid-twentieth-century Dutch concerns must be completely different from my twenty-first-century Canadian concerns. Theo’s *dagboek*, on the other hand, emphasizes the connection between the “then” and “now” of our relationship. His writing, including the *Sinterklaas* passage with its textured description of family life and the love Theo and Bep felt for their children, indicate to me that we share the same story, despite our difference in time and location.



Figure 12. Theo Polman's dagboek, written between 1936-1965, stored in a display case in my parent's home.

Theo maintained his *dagboek* – at least during the war years – in order “to write about the simple things which happen and make life interesting and challenging. Our daily activities continue to be the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. I

hope the children will remember the days of their youth when they read this journal, and if that's the case, it will have been worth my while and troubles" (Polman, 1 Jan 1945). My *Opa* passed away before I was born, yet through reading the *dagboek*, and through the similarities between him and Nelly – his daughter, my mother – I feel as though I have personally known him. My parents' stories of their war-time childhood, their courtship in the Netherlands, their cautious emigration to Canada, and their assimilation into Canadian culture, were continuously weaved into dinner-time conversations throughout my life, and although I am a Canadian citizen, these stories continually remind me that I am a second-generation Dutch immigrant.

My "Canadian" wife and our third-generation immigrant children continue to see this influence in their lives, as when we wipe up the *fritessaus* ('fries sauce,' similar to mayonnaise) or the *chocolade hagelslag* from our table with a *doekie* ('dishcloth'). When visiting my parents in their (unofficially Dutch) Christian retirement home, we are surrounded by the same clocks, pewter pots, and Delft blue ceramics that are described in the *dagboek*. In July 2015, I travelled with my wife and two teenage boys to the Netherlands, and together with my *Oom* Aldert we had dinner at the pizza restaurant that today occupies Theo's home and store. Of course, much has changed, including the disappearance of interior walls, the replacement of flooring, and the lowering of the ceiling. But based on my mother's and Aldert's description, I am fairly certain that my chair rested on the very spot that in former times was occupied by the workroom table, right where Theo would "fold the carpet in half, and under a few loose boards" would hide his illegal newspapers and radio, and his *dagboek*.

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Greg Sennema completed his Master of Information Studies from the University of Toronto (1996) and his Master of Business Administration degree from Wilfrid Laurier University (2010). He works as an academic librarian, previously at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI, and currently at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, ON. His work with students and faculty in the humanities often involves interacting with a wide variety of primary source documents including letters, diaries, and memoirs. His current research interests include the digital humanities and 20th century European history.

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Sous les planches

Mon grand-père, Theo Polman (1904-1965), a entretenu un journal quotidien durant sa vie adulte entière, notant les évènements banals et dramatiques qui avaient eu lieu chez lui à Groningue et dans les alentours. En lisant et en relisant son journal – notamment les pages sur les années sombres de l'occupation nazie – je me suis intimement familiarisé avec les détails quotidiens de la vie de ce responsable de bureau de tabac, ce mari aimant envers sa femme au foyer et ce père aimant envers son fils et sa fille (ma mère). Les descriptions par Theo d'objets tangibles, y compris des trésors familiaux et des produits alimentaires, sont faciles à percevoir dans ma propre éducation en tant qu'un immigré de deuxième génération au Canada. Entre les lignes de ce journal détaillé, pourtant, je reconnais aussi plusieurs particularités abstraites dans le monde néerlandais et réformé de Theo qui étaient présentes aussi dans mon éducation. Dans cet article, je commence – je le soupçonne – un processus permanent de déballage de ces abstractions, déballant les façons dont elles ont contribué à ma propre vision du monde.

Under the Floorboards

Mijn grootvader Theo Polman (1904-1965) hield zijn hele volwassen leven dagelijks een dagboek bij, waarin hij zowel banale als dramatische gebeurtenissen noteerde die plaatsvonden in en rond zijn huis in Groningen. Door het lezen en herlezen van zijn dagboek, vooral de donkere jaren van de Duitse bezetting, ben ik intiem bekend geraakt met de alledaagse details van zijn leven als eigenaar van een sigarenzaak, als liefhebbende echtgenoot van zijn vrouw die het huis bestierde, en als ene zorgzame vader voor zijn zoon en dochter (mijn moeder). Theo's beschrijvingen van tangible objecten zoals erfstukken etenswaren zijn gemakkelijk te herkennen in mijn eigen opvoeding als een tweede-generatie immigrant opgroeiend in Canada. Tussen de regels door herken ik echter ook een aantal abstractere eigenschappen van Theo's Nederlandse en hervormde wereld die deel uitmaakten van mijn eigen opvoeding. In dit artikel begin ik wat naar ik verwacht een levenslang proces zal zijn: het uitpakken van deze abstracties, en hoe die wellicht hebben bijgedragen aan mijn eigen wereldbeschouwing.