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# The Liberation of Groningen

## The Diary Account of Theo Polman

GREG SENNEMA

*Abstract: The city of Groningen in the Netherlands was liberated by the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division during the final month of the Second World War. While the battle was not significant to the outcome of the war, the combat was nonetheless significant for both the participants, as well as the citizens who lived through four days of fierce street fighting. Using his grandfather's detailed diary, and with references to the War Diaries of some of the battalions involved, the author describes the experience of one family that huddled in their home through the battle, and their interactions with Canadian soldiers after the fighting stopped.*

THE LIBERATION of the Dutch city of Groningen by the 2nd Division of the 2nd Canadian Corps does not get much attention in Canadian military history, let alone world history. In the scope of the Second World War in its brutal entirety, a four-day battle in April 1945 that cost the lives of 106 civilians, more than forty Canadian soldiers, and around 140 German soldiers, in many respects pales in comparison to the unimaginable mass killings and maelstrom that enveloped the world throughout the preceding five years.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, making comparisons was likely not on the minds of those

<sup>1</sup> G. J. Ashworth, *The City as Battlefield: The Liberation of Groningen, April 1945*, Groningen Studies 61 (Groningen, Netherlands: Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, 1995), 21; W. K. J. J. van Ommen Kloeke, *De bevrijding van Groningen*, Stad en lande 2 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1945), 152; Beno Hofman, *Groningen in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, Van Oorlogsdreiging Tot Bevrijdingsroes 16 (Assen: In Boekvorm Uitgevers, 2015), 108; J. J. Leeninga and E. Jac Westra, *En t'och staat de Martini. Groningen onder Duitsch schrikbewind* (Groningen: J. Niemeijer, 1945), 137.

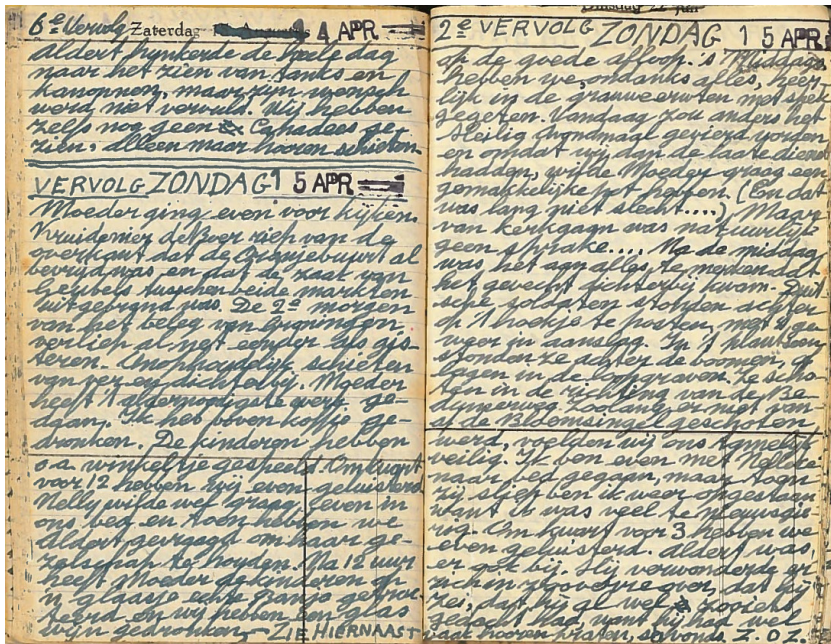


Figure 1. The diary entry for Sunday April 15, 1945, in Theo Polman's *dagboek*. [Author's photo]

involved in the fierce four-day battle. Backed into a corner, German and Dutch ss troops fought for their lives. Canadian soldiers sensed the war would soon be over, and hoped not to be killed in action so close to the end. And the citizens of Groningen, while perhaps not as desperate as those who survived the “Hunger Winter” in the larger cities of western Holland, nevertheless longed for freedom, and hoped to retain whatever belongings and dignity they had left after living through five years of terror, violence, and uncertainty.<sup>2</sup>

My personal interest in Groningen's occupation and liberation grew from the stories of terror and joy my parents shared about their childhoods in that city through those grey years of Nazi occupation. They described images of German soldiers lying dead in the gutter, cavalier Canadians triggering flame-throwers one day, and handing out bread and chocolate the next, but also drunk Canadians with questionable behaviour. My mother's memories in particular were enhanced by the existence of a *dagboek* (diary) that her father Theo

<sup>2</sup> Henri A. Zee Van der, *De hongervinter: van dulle dinsdag tot bevrijding* (Amsterdam: Becht, 1979). An estimated 18,000 people died as a result of starvation.

Polman (1904-1965)—my *opa* (grandfather)—wrote for most of his adult life. With access to this diary, my research and understanding of the Canadian Army's role in the liberation of Groningen is augmented by a detailed daily account of the terrifying battle and aftermath.<sup>3</sup>

There are some Dutch accounts that have helped me understand the context of my *opa's* diary entries written during April 1945. Several books were published within months of the end of the war, such as the photo book *Groningen in Vuur en Puin, De Bevrijding van Groningen*, and *En T'och Staat de Martini*.<sup>4</sup> In 1980, M. H. Huizinga wrote *Maple Leaf Up* using reports and eyewitness accounts to describe the liberation of the northern provinces of Holland, with an emphasis on Groningen, followed in 1999 by his *Vier Dagen in April*, which includes a detailed, hour-by-hour report of events at specific locations. And in commemoration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation, several photographic-rich titles which include chapters on the liberation were published in 2015, including *Groningen in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* and *Groningen 40-45*.<sup>5</sup>

Groningen's liberation is briefly mentioned in a number of English-language works that trace the Canadians' route from Normandy through to Northern Germany. In his *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War*, C. P. Stacey devotes a few pages to the "House-Clearing in Groningen," as does Terry Copp in *The Brigade* and *Cinderella Army*.<sup>6</sup> Additional accounts can be found in the various histories of the regiments that took part, as well as in the

<sup>3</sup> Theodorus Johannes Rietema Polman, "Diary" (Diary, in the author's possession, n.d.). All subsequent references to the diary are made in-text by date.

<sup>4</sup> *Groningen in vuur en puin*, (Groningen: J. Haan, 1945); Leeninga and Westra, *En t'och staat de Martini. Groningen onder Duitsch schrikbewind*.

<sup>5</sup> M. H. Huizinga, *Maple leaf up: de Canadese opmars in Noord-Nederland, april 1945* (Groningen: J. Niemeijer, 1980); M. H. Huizinga and B. van Leusen, *Vier dagen in april* (Groningen: Reco Multi Media, 1999); Hofman, *Groningen in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, 103–16; Martin Hillenga et al., *Groningen 40-45* (Zwolle: WBOOKS, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> C. P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations of North-West Europe 1944-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960), 555; J. T. Copp, *The Brigade: The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1939-1945* (Stoney Creek, Ont.: Fortress Publications, 1992), 190–93; and, J. T. Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 270–75.

official regimental war diaries held at Library and Archives Canada.<sup>7</sup> And finally, several scholars have discussed the military reasoning behind the need to liberate the city instead of simply passing by on the way to the North Sea and Germany. G. J. Ashworth considers the unique nature of the battle, and that throughout history, “retreating armies did not use the defensive potential of cities” as the Germans did in Groningen.<sup>8</sup> The battle of Groningen was also the topic of two dissertations, each offering detailed descriptions of the battle and the directives to limit firepower to reduce civilian casualties: Ralph Dykstra argues that Groningen was a “military necessity” while Jeffrey D. Noll suggests the opposite.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this paper is not to recount the details of the battle, or to debate the decision to liberate the city rather than bypass it. Instead, I would like to introduce the contents of my *opa's dagboek*, and to connect the events as he witnessed them to the reality described in the sources mentioned above. In this way, this paper stands alongside other published first-hand memoirs in English (there are dozens of published works in Dutch), such as *Shadow of Terror*, *True Watcher*, and some personal accounts included in *A Liberation Album: Canadians in the Netherlands, 1944-45*.<sup>10</sup>

With the use of only one cataract-clouded eye, Theo Polman recorded his joys, concerns, frustrations, and the daily activities in his home for much of his life, including the long, grey Nazi occupation of

<sup>7</sup> For example, David Jay Bercuson, *Battalion of Heroes: The Calgary Highlanders in World War II* (Calgary; Toronto: Calgary Highlanders Regimental Funds Foundation; Distributed by Penguin Books, 1994); Kingsley Brown, Kingsley Brown, and Brereton Greenhous, *Semper Paratus: The History of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (Wentworth Regiment), 1862-1977* (Hamilton, Ont.: RHLI Historical Association, 1977); D. J Goodspeed, *Battle Royal: A History of the Royal Regiment of Canada, 1862-1962* ([Place of publication not identified]: Royal Regiment of Canada Assoc., 1962).

<sup>8</sup> Ashworth, *The City as Battlefield*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Dykstra, “The Occupation of Groningen, Netherland, September 1944-April 1945 and the Liberation of the City of Groningen by the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, April 13-16, 1945” (M.A., Wilfrid Laurier University (Canada), 2002); and, Jeffrey D. Noll, *Restraint In Urban Warfare: The Canadian Attack On Groningen* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2014).2014

<sup>10</sup> Rene. Noorbergen, *Shadow of Terror* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Association, 1990); Jan Piëst, *The True Watcher: A Memoir of Events Surrounding the Occupation and Liberation of Groningen, and Their Aftermath* (Groningen: Studio van Stralen BNO, 2005); And, David. Kaufman and Michiel Horn, *A Liberation Album: Canadians in the Netherlands, 1944-45* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1980).





Figure 3. Theo Polman's three story home, fronted by "Polman's Tabak" store (with clock over the door). [Author's photo]



Figure 2. Theo and Bep Polman, with their children Aldert and Nelly, at the back of their home. [Author's photo]

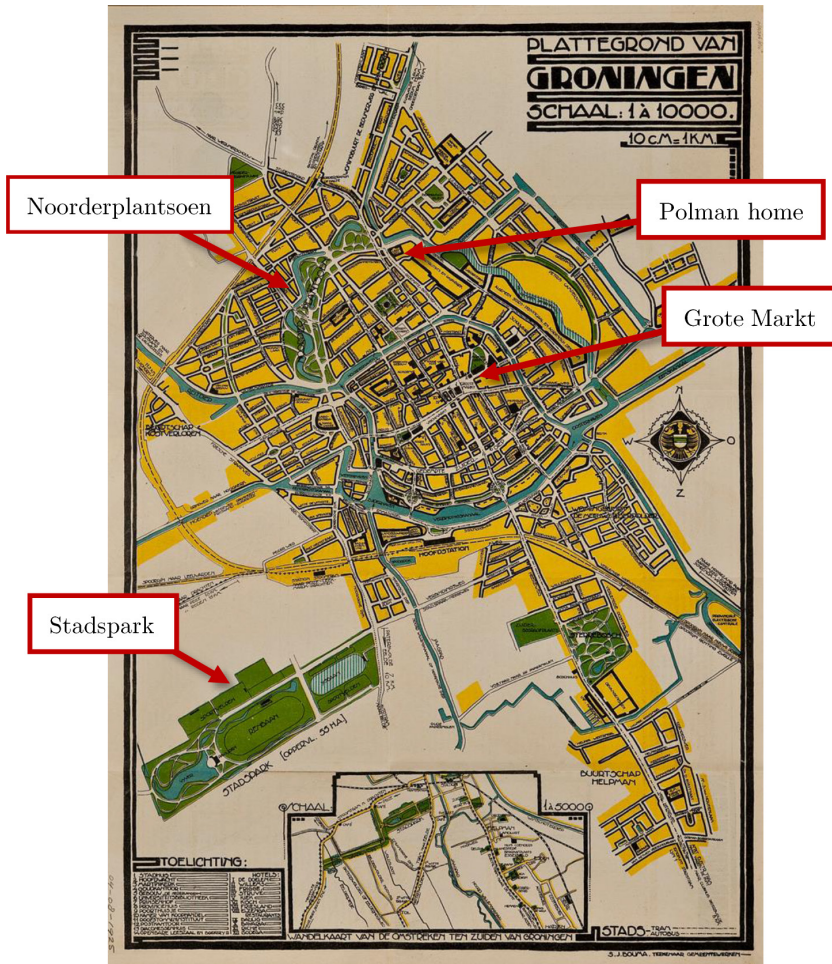


Figure 4. 1925 Map of Groningen. [Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Universiteitsbibliotheek, 1925], <http://irs.ub.rug.nl/ppn/168230720>.]

the Netherlands. His impetus, as he often wrote at the start of a new year and a new diary book, was to record “the everyday experiences of our family, with here and there bits of world events. When in later years our children can remember their carefree childhood through this diary, I will have achieved my objective” (1 January, 1943). Theo and his wife Bep were the proprietors of Polman’s Tobacco store located at the northern edge of the city centre, at the eastern edge of the *Noorderplantsoen* (see Figure 4). Together they had two children: Aldert (b. 1934) and Nelly (b. 1938, my mother), and throughout

the diary Theo describes the stress and anxiety of the constant bombers droning overhead, and stories of oppression, killings, and injustice. Theo passively and actively resisted by hiding contraband, dealing on the black market, concealing a radio, temporarily taking in *onderduikers* (people hiding from the Germans), and by delivering the clandestine *Trouw* newspaper.<sup>11</sup>

Theo longed for freedom, and often wrote words such as “how long before we will be a free country again?” (10 May, 1941). After the southern provinces were liberated in the fall of 1944, he recounted that his wife was already dreaming about the long-awaited liberation: “Mother dreamed that the English sitting in square boxes had landed in the *Grote Markt* (main market square). When they asked her how things were going she replied, ‘Oh, we have enough potatoes’” (5 November, 1944). Listening to his hidden radio and talking with his customers, he learned that the Canadians were getting close, and on 1 April he wrote “Just as in September 1944, we begin to see results and this time the River Rhine is not stopping our liberators. On the contrary, they are now approaching the next obstacle, the River IJssel, about 100 km from Groningen. The way it looks now, it should not take months before we are liberated and hopefully it is just weeks before we are free” (1 April, 1945).

For the first two weeks of April Theo eagerly followed the route of the Canadians, listing the cities as they were liberated, even while dealing with the continued threat of increasingly desperate Germans. On 10 April he wrote,

I was writing in this *dagboek* when Oom Ewold came on his bike. As he was parking it on our back porch, a Kraut showed up and said he wanted the bike. I said: ‘No way, you can’t take it.’ He replied: “Mind your own business and I answered: ‘this is even less your business; you cannot take the bike.’ He then said, ‘but I have to get to Emden (Germany) as quickly as I can and I will give you f25.’ ‘No way’ I said, ‘that’s outright robbery!’ And then a miracle happened. He left without the bicycle!” (10 April, 1945)

On Friday 13 April, despite being shocked and saddened by the news of President Roosevelt’s death, Theo and his family rejoiced upon learning that the Canadians had liberated the city of Assen and

<sup>11</sup> *Trouw* (Amsterdam: Organisatie Trouw, n.d.), <http://www.illegaletrouw.nl>.



were within 30 km of Groningen. Walking through the city later that day, he heard rumours that Canadian tanks were spotted in “Haren, Helpman, near the *Stadspark* (City Park), and the Paterwoldseweg.” Indeed the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry had arrived in Haren at 1600 hours, several kilometres south of Groningen.<sup>12</sup>

This was the start of the battle which ended four days later. Arriving at the south end of a region with a population of around 200,000, the coordinated efforts of the nine infantry battalions and several armoured regiments of the Second Canadian Division ensured that the city would be liberated without resorting to devastating bombardments.<sup>13</sup> While many Germans were likely waiting for an opportunity to flee or surrender, a fanatical minority wished to make a last stand.<sup>14</sup> In many places this meant house-to-house fighting, and dealing with snipers aiming machine guns from basement windows. While some battalions pushed up from the south, others swung in from the west, and by the morning of Monday 16 April, German forces in the old city centre surrounded from the south, west, and north. It is here that the local German commander capitulated, but not before many of the surrounding historic buildings were damaged by artillery and fire.

Tension was in the air on that first day of the battle, as people frantically scurried past the Polman house. “We saw many bicycles and handcarts pushed by NSB [Dutch National Socialist Movement]<sup>15</sup> members, along with their spouses and children, who looked scared. They were loaded down with blankets, bulging suitcases and they looked a sorry mess; mother felt sorry for them, but they have it coming” (13 April, 1945). During their evening meal they heard trucks with loudspeakers ordering all German soldiers to report immediately to their units, and for people to stay off the streets. “Nelly was afraid and very scared, especially after we heard several bursts of gunfire. She longed for the evening and night to be finished. Aldert did not

<sup>12</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *Royal Hamilton Light Infantry War Diary*, vol. 15217, RG 24 (Library and Archives Canada (LAC), 1945).

<sup>13</sup> G.J Ashworth, *War and the City* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), 124; Copp, *Cinderella Army*, 272.

<sup>14</sup> Christ Klep and Ben Schoemaker, *De bevrijding van Nederland 1944-1945: oorlog op de flank* ( 's-Gravenhage: Sdu Uitgeverij Koninginnegracht, 1995), 307.

<sup>15</sup> Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging in Nederland, the National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands. See Bob Moore, “The Netherlands,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, ed. R. J. B. Bosworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 453–69.

fancy spending the night alone, so we made a camp bed for him in our bedroom. I lit a pre-war quality cigar to celebrate the liberation of Assen” (13 April, 1945). As the evening grew quiet, prompting Bep to speculate that the Germans had already capitulated, she peeled potatoes and Theo got their national flag out of storage: “it looked pretty much moth-eaten, but it will have to do for now, especially with the brand new orange sash” (13 April, 1945).

Theo and his family woke early on Saturday 14 April, after a restless night filled with occasional bursts of gunfire that caused the frightened children to find refuge in their parent’s bed. An early morning customer reported that the day before “there was heavy street fighting in the south and the centre of the city” (14 April, 1945). The defenders, “the remnants of various German armies, from the ss to the Hitler Youth...[were] no longer highly motivated”; nonetheless they hid behind roadblocks and anti-aircraft guns, desperately attempting to stop the Canadians from entering the city.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the day the Polman family remained shut in their home, hearing “cannon fire, machine guns, anti-aircraft guns and who knows what else...We had a feeling that there was heavy fighting fairly close by, but were not sure” (14 April, 1945).

The family tried to carry on their lives, eating lunch, reading, and knitting. My mother recalls that during lunch “we saw a group of Germans coming down the *Bloemsingel*; they were busy talking, but suddenly they ran away in all directions. I ducked under the table, deadly afraid. It turned out that a low flying plane came over. The soldier who had first noticed the plane, now laughed his head off!”<sup>17</sup> The only plane recorded as having flown over the city that day was a slow, non-threatening Auster AOP used for reconnaissance.<sup>18</sup> Later that day, as Theo wrote in his journal, there was

[...] fierce fighting going on around our house. Constant shooting, very frightening, and Nelly is beside herself from fear. Finally she went to bed

<sup>16</sup> Piëst, *The True Watcher*, 33–35; Also, Library and Archives Canada, *The Black Watch of Canada War Diary*, vol. 15010, RG 24 (Library and Archives Canada (LAC), 1945). “Today we saw some of the prisoners who had been taken in this town and many of them could not have been more than 15 years of age - if that” (13 April, 1945).

<sup>17</sup> Sennema, Cornelia Polman (Theo’s daughter) in discussion with the author, July 25, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Huizinga and Leusen, *Vier dagen in april*, 103.

and put a pillow over her head to drown out the noise. Mother made our back packs ready, in case we suddenly have to leave our house. *Tante* [aunt] Lien shouted through the air shaft [from the apartment above] in our bedroom that the inner city was a sea of flames with thick, black columns of smoke billowing up from many different places. At 9 p.m. we no longer had electrical power so it did not make sense to wait for the 12 a.m. news, and we went to bed. We kept our clothes on in case we had to leave the house in a hurry. The sky was red because of burning buildings, and the explosions of artillery shells could be heard most of the time. Aldert had looked the whole day for a tank to come by, but so far, he has not seen one. We have not seen Canadian soldiers yet; we just hear lots of shooting (14 April, 1945).

On Sunday 15 April, the family woke again after an uneasy night, filled with the constant sound of mortar fire and exploding shells. “The outskirts of the city,” as described in the *Black Watch War Diary*, “had received quite a pounding from our artillery and not a few fires lined the horizon.”<sup>19</sup> Opening the door a crack and peering outside, Bep learned from the neighbour grocer that the west end of the city—west of the *Norderplantsoen* across the street—had been liberated.<sup>20</sup> The fighting was made more difficult since “Dutch ss and collaborators in civilian clothes were sniping and using bazookas” against the Canadians.<sup>21</sup> According to Theo, “the second day of the siege was like the first day, but more intensified. There was continuous shooting, sometimes far away and then pretty close by” (15 April, 1945). That morning the family tried to cope as best they could, with the children playing around the house, and anticipating their liberation with lemonade for the two children, a glass of wine “saved for the occasion,” and a meal of marrowfats with real bacon. This meal was to be eaten after “church and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper...[but] of course going to church was out of the question” (15 April, 1945).

<sup>19</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *The Black Watch of Canada War Diary*.

<sup>20</sup> Russell Sanderson of the *Black Watch* gives a detailed account of crossing through the *Norderplantsoen* and singlehandedly capturing up to 40 Germans, in Lance Goddard, *Canada and the Liberation of the Netherlands, May 1945* (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2005), 188–191.

<sup>21</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *Royal Hamilton Light Infantry War Diary*, April 14, 1945.

In the afternoon the battle noises became more intensified. From their perspective peeking from the display cases that sat above their store windows, they “saw German soldiers with guns at the ready, standing on street corners and in the *Noorderplantsoen*, where they were hiding behind trees or in trenches” (15 April, 1945). Meanwhile on the western edge of the *Noorderplantsoen*, the Black Watch battalion found that

It became necessary...to take cover and edge their way forward through the back gardens until they reached the house facing on the park itself. Here a pitched battle ensued, lasting over two hours...The opposition encountered at this stage was by far the heaviest encountered so far in this operation. At 15:55 hours all the 2” mortars in the companies laid down heavily on the park and the flame sections fired a few bursts.”<sup>22</sup>

At this time Theo was trying to calm his daughter by taking a nap with her, but once she was asleep, he got up again, “too curious to find out what was going on.” At 16:30 “things looked pretty serious. We heard shots fired close by and coming from all directions. We were petrified; Nelly was terribly afraid and rightly so. Her heart was thumping like crazy and when she happened to look outside, she cried out: ‘He is shooting, he is shooting’ and away she ran to the bedroom. Fortunately, this severe battle did not last too long...but it was intense and extremely frightening” (15 April, 1945). “In the *Noorderplantsoen*,” Theo continues,

many Germans were dug in and no amount of mortar fire could drive them out. Then the Canadians started to use flame throwers which ended all resistance. The German troops started waving a white flag as there was not much else they could do against the Wasp-flame throwers (15 April, 1945).

My mother also recalls seeing the bright flames, but fortunately the entire family was spared from witnessing the effects of this weapon. A German officer described the use of flamethrowers several weeks later in Germany: “The oily flame flared towards the entrenched Germans. When it came in contact with someone, it stuck to their

<sup>22</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *The Black Watch of Canada War Diary*, April 15, 1945.

clothing, setting them on fire, igniting the fat in the victim's body and causing a horrible death in which the body seemed to shrink almost instantly to the size of a child, leaving a charred corpse, frozen in agony."<sup>23</sup> From the Canadians' perspective, "the enemy gave ground reluctantly, but upon being convinced that we meant to oust him from his prepared defences fled, or capitulated."<sup>24</sup>

Towards evening, with the area around their home tentatively liberated, Theo notes that they could still hear a lot of shooting. Despite this, relatives and friends already started dropping by, and when Nelly heard their voices, "she came out of bed [figuring that if they] were not afraid, there was no reason for her to be afraid either." Daring to step outside, Bep found empty bullet cartridges on their back porch and noted that "the neighbours on both sides had their windows damaged and the building on the corner was riddled with bullets. The damage we sustained so far were three small bullet holes in the windows above the display cases" (15 April, 1945). Across the street, they saw a dead German soldier. My mother recalls that "his eyes and mouth were open and there was dust on his teeth. His uniform jacket was opened half way, exposing a metal cross hanging from a chain around his neck. His rifle stood straight up in the mud with his helmet sitting on top, a bit slanted."<sup>25</sup>

The battle around their home had calmed down enough by dinner time for the Polman family to sit down to a late dinner, but by 20:15 Theo writes that the downtown was still

[...] on fire. My neighbour and I decided to climb on his roof, three stories high. [To the south] we saw at least several large fires on either side of the *Oude Ebbingestraat* and also a huge fire on the *Grote Markt*. The sky was red over the city centre and we heard a constant sound like thunder; I could see glowing projectiles fly over the city. According to rumours, the Germans were setting the fires with mortars. We found this scarier than what we had experienced during the day. The sky over the inner city became brighter by the minute and the sounds of war continued without pause...Many people fled from the downtown area

<sup>23</sup> Stephen J. Colombo, *A Letter from Frank: An Unlikely Second World War Friendship* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2011), 177.

<sup>24</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *The Black Watch of Canada War Diary*, April 15, 1945.

<sup>25</sup> Sennema, Cornelia Polman (Theo's daughter) in discussion with the author, July 25, 2016.



with loaded bikes, perambulators, hand carts and bicycle carriers; also people from our neighbourhood who were afraid that the fires would come our way. Fortunately, the wind was not very strong, although it was blowing in our direction. We did not want to go to bed, but decided to take turns. I took the first watch to 4 a.m. and mother would take over at that time. The children were sound asleep and blissfully unaware of everything that was going on. And this is how the most stirring and eventful Sunday in our lives ended! (15 April, 1945)

After yet another restless night, this time full of worries about the fires, the family woke up on Monday 16 April to more trouble: “we heard lots of shooting in front of our house. So it definitely was not over yet! When we looked outside a little later, we saw that Canadian soldiers were on the roof of the house directly across the street from us and also in front of the shops. Mother also saw a tank going [south] in the direction of downtown” (16 April, 1945).

Around noon they “spent a long time standing in our open shop door and it was great to see many of the NSB traitors escorted and paraded down the street. The first ones we saw were a man, walking in slippers and his wife wearing a fur coat. They were mocked and ridiculed from all sides.” The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry war diary recorded that “no love is shown by the patriots to these collaborators. Troops strictly adhere to the hands off policy as it is purely a Dutch problem.”<sup>26</sup> After their midday meal Bep placed an orange bow in Nelly’s hair and a sash around the waists of both her children: “We have waited 5 long years for this moment and now it really is here!” (16 April, 1945). Later that afternoon, young Aldert came home to tell his parents that they were not allowed to wear orange colours yet since German planes were coming to attack. This news was noted in the Black Watch war diary as well: “A Dutch policeman started a rumour that the town was about to be bombed by the Germans, and then they were going to endeavour to retake it. The flags which had been hung out disappeared like snow in the Spring.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *Royal Hamilton Light Infantry War Diary*, April 15, 1945.

<sup>27</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *The Black Watch of Canada War Diary*, April 16, 1945.

At this same time, unknown to Theo, the German forces were capitulating. The war diary of the battalion Les Fusiliers de Montreal reported that around noon two

[...] German adjutants with white flags walked in our lines. After being interrogated they revealed that the commander of Groningen did not want to surrender but that his officers and men were fed up and would gladly give themselves up. Our commanding officer Colonel J. A. Dextraze decided to go to the German commander's HQ. Accompanied by the 2 adjutants...Colonel Dextraze drove into the enemy lines. The adjutants directed [him] to the garrison commander. After some discussion the German colonel accepted to surrender his garrison to our battalion commander...Soon after people hoisted flags and cheered their liberators.<sup>28</sup>

Later that day Theo and his friend Oom Ewald walked around the city, looking in disbelief at “buildings cut in half and bathtubs... hanging in midair...scarred pavement, exposed and broken gas lines and water mains, plus the ever present acrid smell of fires.” They noted “a Canadian soldier sitting on the steps of one of the buildings, emptying rifles and other weapons left behind by either captured or retreating Krauts.” Theo also noted that “the house of the Provincial Governor had already been taken over by the Canadians.” Even though “no great damage was done to the Power Plant”<sup>29</sup>, electric power was still out through much of the city, and the combined special edition of the various clandestine newspapers was produced with the “presses being turned manually by NSB traitors” (16 April, 1945).

On their first full day of freedom, Tuesday 17 April, Theo was pleased to hear on the 11:45am BBC news “that in Groningen the Krauts had capitulated and that the city was free.” Nelly was so exhausted by the turmoil of the preceding four days, that “that she fell asleep at the table and ended up with her elbows in the porridge!” (17 April, 1945). Being “free”, however, did not mean that life was close to being back to normal. Curfew was still in effect from 9pm to

<sup>28</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *Les Fusiliers de Montreal War Diary*, vol. 15066, RG 24 (Library and Archives Canada (LAC), 1945), April 16, 1945.

<sup>29</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *Essex Scottish Regiment War Diary*, vol. 15059, RG 24 (Library and Archives Canada (LAC), 1945), April 16, 1945.



Figure 5. Nelly wearing an orange dress, sewn together the day before. The photo is taken from the store window, with the Noorderplantsoen seen in the background. [Author's photo]

7am. NSB traitors—including collaborating girls with shaved heads—were periodically paraded past Theo's home. And some of the long-awaited Canadian soldiers were not as glamorous when seen up close. "Cases of Canadians disgracing themselves and their uniform in town," as recorded in the Fort Garry Horse war diary, was "the only sour note in an otherwise admirable picture."<sup>30</sup> Theo writes of a relative who told him "that while they took shelter in the strong room in their cellar, Canadians had stolen her purse with jewelry" (17 April, 1945). Despite the fact that "certain rules of discipline [were]

<sup>30</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *Fort Garry Horse War Diary*, vol. 14234, RG 24 (Library and Archives Canada (LAC), 1945), April 15, 1945.

emphasised to the troops,”<sup>31</sup> Theo often saw drunk Canadians, and on one occasion just after the end of the war, he describes that a “drunk Canadian soldier wanted to throw some kids into the water, and when that did not happen, he tried to kick in a door somewhere. Nevertheless, free Holland welcomes the soldiers of our Allies!” (17 April, 1945).

Despite these incidents, Theo’s primarily positive descriptions of the Canadian soldiers matches the positive perspectives described in countless liberation narratives of both the Canadians and the Dutch. “The people in Groningen are overjoyed and all excited of being liberated after four years of enemy oppression. Their hospitality and kindness to everyone are noticeable and to remember always.”<sup>32</sup> Theo described many instances of interaction between his family and the Canadians. “Nelly received a few candies from a Canadian soldier and a cigarette for her ‘dad,’ Theo wrote on 19 April, and then a few days later described that “a teenaged neighbour girl wrote down a few English sentences for Aldert, so that he can ‘beg’ candies, gum or chocolates from the Canadians. He tried it right away but did not have any luck” (26 April, 1945). Aldert would often visit the Canadian soldiers who had pitched their tent in the *Noorderplantsoen*, while Nelly would roam the streets looking “for friendly Canadian solders,” and if successful would receive some bubblegum; she “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’ [the soldier] said” (4 May, 1945). And their food situation certainly improved: “Now that we are free, the Krauts still in our country are not stealing our food anymore. As far as that goes, the Canadians have better and much more food than we have seen in years. Our bread rations were increased by 800 kg per person every two weeks. Our meat rations have doubled and we get ½ lbs more sugar per person every week” (4 May, 1945).

Theo was grateful for the Canadian presence, and describes seeing “a Canadian soldier on a motorcycle, driving slowly, with a Dutch ss soldier dressed in German uniform, running ahead of him. The Canadian shouted: “laufen, laufen, laufen” (run!) They came from

<sup>31</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *The Calgary Highlanders War Diary*, vol. 15021, RG 24 (Library and Archives Canada (LAC), 1945), April 17, 1945.

<sup>32</sup> Library and Archives Canada, *Le Régiment de Maisonneuve War Diary*, vol. 15188, RG 24 (Library and Archives Canada (LAC), 1945), April 17, 1945.



Theo Polman in his store, several years after the end of the war. [Author's photo]

Hoogkerk, where the traitor was arrested.” By this time, everyone knew that the war was over, and that the next morning, the official papers would be signed. “Nobody had bothered about curfew! Mother stood in the store doorway until 11 p.m. and watched people pass by, walking arm in arm, including Canadian soldiers. It meant a late night for Aldert who did not get to bed until midnight. Nelly was not aware of anything and slept through it all! Freedom—Finally!” (4 May, 1945).

The day after the war officially ended, Theo and his family went to their church (Oosterkerk Gereformeerde Kerk) where “we had a good sermon based on Psalm 115:12: ‘The Lord has remembered us and blessed us.’ It was a short service; at 10 there was a service for Canadian soldiers led by one of their chaplains. We decided to stay,



even though we could not understand a word and it was interesting to watch” (6 May, 1945). The liberation celebrations continued, and they “watched the bonfire, started by people in our neighbourhood. We also chatted with a Canadian soldier, mostly through gestures, and we understood each other pretty well.” The celebrations continued for many days, and on Saturday 12 May Theo wrote that the children “went out and frolicked with Canadian soldiers who sat in a jeeps and Aldert was allowed behind the wheel. They begged for gum and chocolates of course, and usually got some too” (6 May, 1945).

During the ensuing year, Theo periodically mentioned the presence of the Canadians in his *dagboek*. For example, in July 1945 he notes that it was the Canadians who laid the bridge that he crossed on his way to the eastern town of Appingedam. In August Nelly received an entire milk chocolate bar from a Canadian, and then a few days later, Theo learned of Japan’s surrender from two Canadians who were in his store wanting to trade cigarettes for a tobacco pipe. Indeed, cigarettes had become “a sort of reserve currency in the black market, cigarettes were desired not only in themselves but for what they might buy.”<sup>33</sup> Theo heard from one Canadian that they received 900 cigarettes per week (25 May, 1945).

A significant connection with the Canadians was felt when a good family friend, Ypie Vroom, became engaged to W. B. Miller of Tillsonburg, Ontario. Before the couple was married on 26 April, 1946, they would visit, and Theo commented that he could not understand much of what the Canadian said. For many of the Dutch, the “Canadians were both heroes and saviours,” and thousands of women like Ypie became war brides of their liberators; it is even possible “to see the war brides as the harbinger of Dutch emigration.”<sup>34</sup> My parents Nelly, and her future husband Willem (who has his own memories of seeing members of the Black Watch fighting around his home on the western side of the *Noorderplantsoen*) would be two of the estimated 184,150 emigrants from the Netherlands to Canada between 1946 and 1982.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Michiel Horn, “More than Cigarettes, Sex and Chocolate: The Canadian Army in the Netherlands, 1944-1945,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 16, no. 3-4 (1981): 158.

<sup>34</sup> Michiel Horn, “Canadian Soldiers and Dutch Women after the Second World War,” in *Dutch Immigration to North America*, ed. Herman Ganzevoort and Mark Boekelman (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1983), 188, 194.

<sup>35</sup> Albert VanderMey, *To All Our Children: The Story of the Postwar Dutch Immigration to Canada* (Jordan Station, Ont., Canada: Paideia Press, 1983), 53.



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