

THIS PAGE: The stepped gables of the narrow houses lining this canal in Amsterdam are distinctively Dutch.
OPPOSITE PAGE, FILM STRIP, TOP: A cyclist amid the ruins in Rotterdam soon after the invasion of 1940.
LOWER: German soldiers march the streets of Holland during World War II.



DUTCH COURAGE

He hid in a coffin and escaped from a moving train. When Monique Balvert-O'Connor takes her Dutch father to Holland, the trip brings alive his wartime memories



ABOVE: Past and present collide for Monique in Holland. She lingers in one of Utrecht's cloistered gardens.

THE PUNGENT AROMA OF coffee mingles with the sweet scent of freshly flipped pancakes. Cheery yellow umbrellas invite you to tables scattered around the bustling pancake wagon in this old cobble-stoned Dutch city square. Today we seem so far from the horrors of wartime.

My 81-year-old, pipe-puffing father, Herman Balvert, and I allow the excitable Dutch chatter from neighbouring tables to wash over us. I'm quietly thrilled that I can understand what's being said. It gives me a wonderful sense of belonging, even though this foreign place is so different from the small South Waikato town where I grew up.

I was wrapped in baby blankets in my mother's arms when I last visited. Yet it's familiar. My parents' homeland, this is the setting of gripping stories that fascinated me as I grew up.

For as long as I can remember, my father has been a master storyteller. He brought alive his late-teen years when Europe was at war and young Dutch men were rounded up in German raids and transported by train to work in German factories and labour camps. As a child I delighted in stories about Dad's determination to evade capture and his hiding places – a secret compartment under toilet floorboards, a cupboard with false backing, a coffin at an undertaker's.

Stepping back into his past becomes particularly poignant when we visit the city of Utrecht where my parents grew up, met, and survived World War II. Here I get to see where the undertaker's business once was, and I stand in the shadow of Dad's family home. There, three storeys up, is the bedroom with the bleak cupboard where he hid.

Dad points out the room in a neighbouring house where a Jewish family hid the length of the war. These, too, are the streets of my mother's memories: starving people rummaging in rubbish bins for potato peels.

We stroll the canals, past cloistered gardens and old wharf cellars transformed into cafes, to Utrecht's Dom Tower. My father was captured by the Germans at the base of this 112m-high cathedral tower, and bundled on a train for Germany. He never got there, and we thrilled to the story of his escape, leaping from the moving train.

Dad and I add another chapter to this war story when we track down a friend Dad hasn't seen for 61 years. Also a train jumper, he smashed his ankles and knees when he hit the ground. He →



JOURNEY

has no trouble remembering Dad's name – it's etched in his memory. Without my father's help, he tells me, he would have been stranded on the tracks and shot.

This trip has brought history to life for me and answered a deep-rooted yearning to visit Holland with my dad so he could point out places pivotal to his and Mum's lives. Now an octogenarian, he'd joked that time was running out.

As the daughter of immigrants, I grew up in a Dutch microclimate in New Zealand in many ways, although that was never my parents' intention. At primary school, my best friends all had Dutch parents; we grew up with traditions like *oliebollen* (Dutch doughnuts) at New Year, and we were passionate about World Cup football matches. Plus, we ate like the Dutch – devouring salty licorice, lashings of stewed apple, strawberries with sugar on bread, and chocolate hail sandwiches. My introduction to the Kiwi roast dinner didn't occur until my teens, when my sister's fiancé cooked for us one night.

Then there's the matter of language. According to my older siblings, my first words were in Dutch, and it wasn't until I was 17 that I realised my parents had accents. Around the same time, when asked what language my parents spoke at home, I was astounded to realise I had no idea. In fact, they spoke a mixture.

As an avid reader, I loved the look of words like arrogant and epitome, but had no idea how to pronounce them; the use of English was more basic in our house. And sometimes it was muddled – like the time Dad told my brother's girlfriend he was going to build a big ovary in the back yard because he loved birds.

Now, in Holland, the shoe is on the other foot. My Dutch cousins try to hide their grins as I speak a version of the language my parents brought to the other end of the world 55 years ago as post-war migrants. Not having had the chance to evolve, my Dutch is without colloquialisms, and apparently sounds formal and quaint.

My Dad introduces me to uncles, aunts and cousins – most of them I haven't seen since that visit 40 years ago when I was a baby.

Family similarities, especially to my mother, who died seven years ago, leave me teary-eyed. Meeting family members for the first time is odd. We are strangers from very different worlds yet close through family ties.

Aunts and uncles tell me stories that add a new dimension to my parents.



ABOVE: A Dutch flag flies on the Martini Tower in Groningen. ABOVE: At the base of the Dom Tower, where Herman was captured.

I come to truly appreciate how they have lived with feet in different worlds, and gain a greater respect for their pioneering spirit.

Much in Holland is as I expected – the cheese shops, the cafes, the way people dress. What I find truly difficult to get my head around is the age of things. The sense of history here is mind-boggling. Ancient buildings seem to almost prop each other up, their stunning façades featuring spires, arches, shutters, intricate brickwork and tiny individual panes of glass.

When we pass a towering cathedral in Haarlem city, my aunt casually mentions that Mozart once performed





OPPOSITE PAGE, FILM STRIP, TOP: Monique and Herman up the Dom Tower. **MIDDLE:** Herman and the train jumper he rescued years before. **LOWER:** Herman and Monique's mother's sister, Thea. **THIS PAGE, TOP:** The colourful contents of a cheese shop. **ABOVE:** A nation of cyclists.

there, and suddenly the man seems human, not just a legend. In the north near the city of Groningen I read a church plaque dating back to the 11th century, and in Utrecht my mind grapples with the fact it's a medieval city once occupied by the Romans.

As my stay draws to a close, I reflect on the wonder of seeing places that meant so much to my family and delight in feeling a strong connection with this land. Before coming here I believed I was a Dutch girl living in New Zealand, but I now realise that while I'm hugely proud of my heritage and treasure the affinity I feel with Holland, in my heart I am a New Zealander.

My trip to Holland has offered answers and helped me define my place in the world. I belong under Southern skies. I've missed the open spaces, the hills, beautiful beaches and coastal living, Pacific Rim cuisine, a casual approach to life, and the ease of day-to-day living in a sparsely populated land.

While I'm away, halfway across the world, tuis are singing outside my office window, waves are crashing on Mount Maunganui beach nearby, and my four barefooted sons are tearing around our backyard. This Kiwi girl is happy to be going home. ■

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