



Video Story Transcript

A BRILLIANT DAY: A DUTCH WOMAN'S COURAGEOUS TRAVELS IN NAZI OCCUPIED HOLLAND

By: Storyteller Peter R. LeGrand

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEy8O9CNOvM>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My name is Peter Robert LeGrand and this is a story that I've been lucky enough to tell about my amazing family.

It's a brilliant summer day in Chicago in 2016. And when I look down, I can see my feet turning the pedals on my bike in a satisfying rhythm as we make our way down the lakefront trail. I'm with a group of friends and as we go, we can see groups of picnickers are set up along the lake with their grills. There's endless mounds of cooking meat and other foods and the smell is so potent you can just about wrap yourself in it. It's like a coat of flavor that we are slowly riding past as we go. We hear music of every kind as we moved down the bike trail. And after a little while, we stop for a few minutes near some folks who are playing Samba music. One of our riders and his girlfriend jump off their bikes and they start dancing to the music, immediately. Moving back and forth, arms and hips, and music all coming together in one continuous flow. After a few moments of this, they jump back on their bikes and off we go down the lakefront trail.

My thoughts start turning to my grandmother. Who, some 70 years ago, took a series of bike rides of her own during the war. I recall her telling me about these rides and thinking to myself, what an amazingly, brave thing to do. But she, herself, said it really wasn't a question of courage. It was just something that you had to do. It was winter. The last winter of the war and life was very hard. The Germans had taken over almost every aspect of life in Nazi occupied Holland. It was very difficult to come by almost anything there. And as a result,

even food was very difficult to get. That last winter of the war was called De Honger Winter or The Winter of Hunger. As I said, food was very hard to get. My mother used to speak about how my grandmother would take a small tin of coffee, one that we might use just in a week's time, and make it last for months. And by the end of it, she said, it will be nothing more than brown colored water. My grandparents received ration coupons for food during the war. This included bread. My grandfather used to say that they chopped up straw and baked it right into the bread. It was so bad. My mother recalls that the straw would even stick in your throat when you ate it.

Some 12 miles away from where my grandparents and my mother lived was another family member who was a baker. My grandmother set out one day on her bike to retrieve and get some bread for her family and two other families. She hid when she saw German patrols. The Germans would use almost any pretense to arrest you. And they all lived in constant fear and awareness of curfews. And just if they were violated, you could be arrested and taken to jail. Simply walking down the street was cause for fear. But on this trip, she was able to get some bread for herself and families and return home safely. A few months later, she set out on another ride farther away with more risk. This time my grandmother was asked to take seed supplies to another family who was also, of another family member, who was also a baker.

As dangerous as it was for her to do this, it had become even more dangerous for my grandfather to be out in public. By this time, the Germans had been rounding up all able bodied men to help in labor camps promoting the Germans war effort. It was dangerous in German occupied countries for non-Jewish men. Even more dangerous, at times, than for Jewish people. Labor camps were places that Germans had started to produce war materials to support their war efforts and being in one of these camps was known to be almost as dangerous as being a Jew. My grandfather, on my father's side, was actually taken to one of these camps and he was only one of 11 people who was able to escape. And he only escaped because he bribed his way out of this camp. So while my grandmother was out trying to get food for my family, my grandfather was avoiding being captured by hiding in a dirt-filled space under the floorboards of the living room in their house.

All the time I was growing up, I never heard my grandfather speak of these things. He was a very quiet, thoughtful man, who never really made a fuss about much of anything. I heard all of these stories from my mother. I try to imagine him, underneath the floorboards of his living room. Not making a motion, not able to hear anything, only vague noises from maybe my mother walking to and from the front window where she was to look-out for German soldiers. He couldn't see anything and he had to lay in this unnerving quiet. Was this simply a prelude to some shouting and banging on the front door announcing the arrival of German soldiers? What would they think if they saw that there was a small child, my mother, at home with no parents around? Would he have to listen to the Germans searching his house? Would it be worse to lay in the dark, not being able to see your enemy or would it be better to be out in the open to see him coming? On top of all this laying in the dark, worrying about his wife who is out in the world. In a dangerous world that they lived in with no peace of mind for any of them. I now understand all the better that my mother used to say after Hitler, "Everything else was easier."

So I was riding along on that summer day in Chicago, thinking of my grandmother as she rode trying to find food when I passed a woman who was guiding a decked out bike with cargo bags, a red bike. And she's talking on her cell phone and I can hear her as I ride slowly by. "Yeah. Going to go to a party later. Maybe stop and get some wine and cheese. I'm thinking about going to a yoga class, maybe have a nap." My grandmother's bike not only didn't have cargo bar bags it didn't even have two good tires. After the successful trip said she had taken, she set out on another trip. Even farther away on a borrowed bike.

This bike had one good tire, the other tire being what was called the hard tire. It had a garden hose wrapped around the rim with just pieces of wire to hold it in place. After some four hours of riding on this bike with one good tire, she arrived at a cousin's house out in the country. In addition to the cousin's family that were in the house, there was another five people who were either Dutch Resistance or Jews or maybe both. They were all in hiding in that house and they were all wanted by the Germans. My grandmother was invited to stay

for dinner. And some 40 years later, she wrote in her diary about this meal that she had. We had delicious tomato soup with meat and meat balls and a pot roast and stewed apples and really good boiled potatoes with delicious brown gravy. And afterwards for dessert, we had rice pudding with delicious berry sauce. "I had not eaten like that in years," she wrote in her diary.

My mother and father used to talk frequently about food after the war. After the war, the allied forces dropped food from the air to get food in quickly to the people who had been liberated. My mother used to talk about the bread that was dropped in. And she would close her eyes and she put her hand over her chest and she would talk about it. And I could see that she was back in that exact moment reliving the taste of that fresh bread that was dropped to them after the war. And when I read my grandmothers diary, I can tell that she was reliving that same tomato soup meal that she had as well.

That summer day when we were about 10 miles from downtown Chicago, we stopped at a rest stop along the lake where there was a snack bar. And I stopped and I looked at the menu, which is painted in big cartoon, almost garish, colors. There's roast beef sandwiches, and there's Polish hotdogs, and there's onions, and there's French fries, and there's nachos, and there's potato chips, and ice cream. And I watch the kids come up to the snack bar and grab their treats and eagerly run back for more playtime on the beach as they're eating.

After that dinner of tomato soup that my grandmother had, she was given a large bundle of food: rice, butter, flour, things that they couldn't get in the city. And on the way home, she stopped and traded a pair of my grandfather's pants for some wheat that she carried home in her backpack. After my grandmother pedaled home that day, she would... worried that she would not make it home in time for curfew that the Nazis set. If she was discovered, the German patrols were known to attack and steal and take everything you had. There was no fear of reprisals against the soldiers. But luckily, and astoundingly, after some 50 miles of riding, she made it home that day before the curfew. She and all of her precious packages of food were safe. My grandmother took that same trip several times before the end of the war. Riding slowly, with one good bike tire, on a borrowed bike, carrying precious food home but carrying much worry as well.

I rode some more that day under that beautiful blue sky and finally at the end of the lakefront trail, I said goodbye to my friends and I turned myself north to head home onto the train. I'd ridden that day about the same distance that my grandmother rode. But I would never match the true distance that she rode that day. She wrote that she admired the bravery of others that she met on her rides. That all the while, while she's dodging German patrols and bombings from the British, and all the while avoiding patrols and ducking into the woods if she was seen. Racing against the clock. And every moment of her rides was the one thing that set her apart from all others, that she did all of these rides with the bright, yellow Star of David sewn to her coat for all to see. I pedaled home, each turn of the wheels along the path, every turn, a reminder of those long ago bike rides and the woman who described herself as a woman of little courage.