Chapter Six

January to Concentration Camp

On January first we were told that we were leaving the next day. According to the plan, we were to go by bicycle to Opheusden about ten kilometres away and only a few miles from the front lines. From there we were to walk to an old brick-yard, down by the River Waal, very close to the front line. We would then pass through the German lines to no man's land, cross a bridge and, when dark, cross over the canal. A Canadian army patrol was to meet us and guide us through the Allied' lines. This seemed simple but a little frightening, as I was not trained in army life and did not really know what to expect. I told the guys that I'd rather be up in the sky dropping bombs than down here catching them. We left on bicycles early in the evening, rode about ten or twelve miles to Opheusden and left our bicycle there. I don't know who picked up all the bicycles as we seemed to be changing or leaving them all the time. We walked a few miles through the German rear lines to the old barn-like building , in the brick yard, where everyone was to meet. The foreman of the brickyard, Leo Wels, was to hide us until nightfall. There were seven of us plus the three paratroopers. Later another five plus our guides came

along, making nineteen of us. No one introduced anyone. As usual, what you did not know, you could not tell. We waited until dark before leaving. We were travelling really light, (I can't even remember having any food with us). There was ice all around and it was very cold.

Fig.6a Brick yard where we met on January 2, 1945

I was planning on staying pretty close to Roger or Wilf, as they knew more of this army life than I did, and I knew them better than the others as we had lived together and hid upstairs together in the attic.

When it got dark we started off, nineteen of us including Dirk and two other guides. We got to the bridge safely and waited around for a while, but no Canadian patrol showed up. Finally, we decided we'd go it on our own. After walking a few more miles, we ran into a German patrol and all of us scattered, lying low until they had passed by.

We managed to assemble again but found that we had lost our two Dutch guides. It's pretty easy to lose someone when it is very dark and you can't talk because you do not know how close the Germans are. However, we had to go on. We stayed pretty close to the river, and sneaked past quite a few German outposts, so close to them that we could hear them talking. For someone like me, who had never been in the army, I was having to learn very fast.

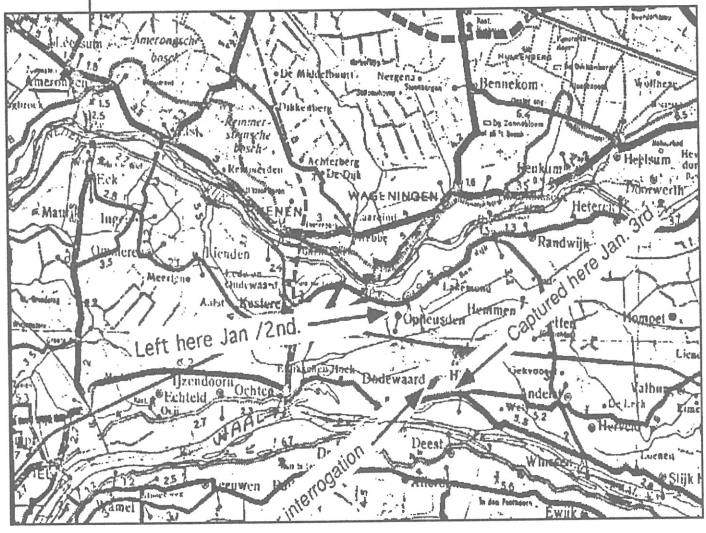

Fig.6b Map of area where we were captured

There was no time to be frightened but I was, so I tried to make it a game. I felt sure the Germans would hear us, as there was so much ice and it was breaking up and making quite a bit of noise. However, we passed the outposts and didn't see any

more for quite awhile. We were on the edge of the flooded low lands, which the Germans had flooded at Arnhem, when the British landed there. It had later frozen over, then thawed, and it was now in an in-between state.

We ran into lots of drowned cattle, all bloated up. It was an awful feeling to fall on a bloated, slimy, slippery dead cow in the dark. We didn't know what they were at first, it was so very dark! It seemed a great waste when so many were going hungry.

We walked further. It was about ten o'clock when we came to another old brick yard. Where were we? No one seemed to know. The Dutchmen we had lost were our main guides and the others, who were with us going across on Underground business didn't know much more than we did. With the one compass we had, we decided to head south. We knew we had gone through what was called "no man's land" and felt we were pretty close to the British lines, and that we only had to go a few more miles. We left and headed down the road, going in a roughly southern direction. We were sure we had to cross the river but we were hoping to find some Allied troops on this side of the river Waal.

We eventually came to another cross road and now didn't know which way to go. As we crossed the road, a fellow on a bicycle came along. We weren't going to stop him as we didn't know whether he was British or German. We let him go by but he saw us. As we started to go in the same direction, suddenly there was a shout and machine gun fire, bullets flying all over the place, and we all ran in every direc-

tion. Now we were really scattered. I lost track of Roger and found myself with Wilf Berry. Being a sergeant major in the Army, he gave me a very quick course on army life. When he said run, I ran.

The Germans became very excited. They would fire a big flare in the air and then shoot at anything they saw or anything that moved. Wilf would say "dive" and I would dive. Sometimes we were on the ice, sometimes in mud or in water six inches to a foot deep. However, when you are being shot at, you get down very fast and lay very still. Wilf had been shot in the arm so we made up a bit of a sling and kept going. We ran very fast to try and get out of this area. It was very dark and partially frozen.

In a couple of hours things quieted down. W e knew that they had shot a couple of our guys but we did not know what happened to the others. We figured some were captured, and maybe the Germans thought that was all there were. I was wearing a pair of light oxfords, but I lost them in the mud and ice. Coming across an old fruit shed, we decided to hole up there for the night, hoping that things might look better in the morning. At this stage, Wilf and I were not a very active pair, he with his wounded arm and me with no shoes in the ice and mud. It had been a long night.

The night of January second was a very long night! Here we were, Wilf and I, hiding most of the night in an old shed, on the flood plains of the river Waal, cold, wet and hungry. We could hear voices in the distance but could not tell if they were German or English. Since we had gone through the German

lines, we were now sitting in the middle of it all and there was no going back. It was unbelievable! W e were so close to the German Posts that we could hear them talking. Gads, if I let my mind go a little I would think I was in a movie. We knew we were in no man's land, and we were at a very low ebb in life. This was real army life. I was trained to fly, not to fight down here.

The shed we were in had some apples that had been stored in a barrel before the invasion. We were hungry and we tried eating them but they had been frozen and thawed out and were awful! Then we looked around and found a barrel of sauerkraut. I had never eaten sauerkraut at home, but I'd eaten it a few times at my sister Jean's place as her husband, Alfred, was Polish. I had just begun acquiring a bit of a taste for it. So into the barrel we went. It was not very good, but we ate some, although it was really rotten! I don't think I ever enjoyed eating sauerkraut again!

Wilf's arm was really hurting now and my feet felt as if they were half frozen. The shoes I had been wearing were an old pair of oxfords. There was no use wearing a good pair as I thought I would be able to buy a new pair in London the next day! I had taken the heel off, cut a hollow out, put my identity disks in the hole and put the heel back on again. So, losing my shoes meant I had lost my identification. That was not good! It also wasn't good that we had civilian clothes on, which is illegal for servicemen in war time.

We had to make a decision, we couldn't stay in the shed and the river was too wide to get across. Wilf couldn't swim with a bullet in his arm and I didn't know how. I was never much for water and never learned to swim until I was 40 years old. I was a slow learner as far as swimming was concerned. W e made a decision to head toward the voices. We soon found out that it was the wrong way to go. It was the German camp. We were very depressed as we were so sure we would be in London for the New Year and were now very apprehensive of what would happen to us. We were in civilian clothes. They had chased us all night. We knew what they did to the Underground people when they were captured. We were so close to freedom yet so far away.

The German troops weren't very pleased with us as they had been up most of the night, looking for us. Wilf had left his Sten Gun in the shed but they found it afterwards. They thought we were in the Dutch Underground because we were also in civilian clothes. Some of them had been hurt in the fight the night before and we learned that four or five of our group had been killed. We found out later that only three of the nineteen made it to the other side, but they were in very bad shape as they had to swim the frozen canal. I'm sure I would have died doing that, even if I were able to swim. The successful ones were Captain Roger Schjelderup, Sgt. Gri, and Private Hardy all very experienced soldiers. They had landed on D-Day and had fought through France and Belgium.

It was fortunate that our captors were from the regular army, the Wermacht. Although they were not very pleased with us, I don't think they knew what to do with us. How often would they have captured military personnel in civilian clothes? They had every right to shoot us, but instead they gave me a pair of wooden shoes, which was a God-send. Walking on bare feet is very tough at the best of times, but in the winter it's really bad. The wooden shoes were very awkward to walk in, but a lot better than nothing and that was all I had to walk in for the next three months. They also gave us a bowl of hot soup which tasted really good right then. I guess anything would have tasted good at that moment. I often wonder if a group of our army personnel who had been up half the night chasing a bunch of Underground and enemy in soldiers civilian clothes would have been as nice. Some army guys I talked to later said, "You were very lucky that they didn't shoot you right there."

Our nice treatment didn't last long. I guess we were a big catch for the Germans. They had caught Dutch Underground people, military personnel and they were not sure who else. The Field Army Police (Feld-Gendarmerie) soon took over the investigation. They were special police who were connected to the army, part of or similar to the Gestapo. They were not very nice to us! I think they would have liked to have us shot right there. We saw Dirk, the Dutch guide, who had been with us. It was very sad. The Dutch Underground were treated much worse than we were. Dirk had also lost his shoes in the mud

and ice, but the Germans did not give him any shoes and his feet were bleeding badly. He had some old rags wrapped around them. They had also beaten him up severely. We had to totally ignore him as it wouldn't have done either of us any good to have recognised each other. It was very hard. I always thought he must have lost his feet or died in a concentration camp. I saw him in the next couple of weeks off and on, but then never saw him again. Louis, Marcel, Harvey, and the doctor from the Army all showed up, but we didn't see any of the others.

They began to interrogate us, very seriously. W e all stuck to our story, as previously arranged. We did not know each other and we had never met before last night. That way, we did not have to worry about the other person's story. Each one made up their own story and had to stick to it. The Geneva Convention set out how prisoners of war were to be treated. The Germans and the Allies stuck close to it, although the Japanese and the Russians did not. However, civilian political prisoners were not covered by the Geneva Convention, and that is why the concentration camps were so horrible. They were filled with civilian and political prisoners. We were only obliged to give our name, rank and serial number and we tried to stick to it. They told us many times that, as we were captured in civilian clothes and armed, we were classified as spies so not protected by the Geneva Convention, so they could shoot us. We were kept apart most of the time but we would be put together for some reason every

once in a while. We were too frightened to talk about anything, in case they were listening or had microphones around. It was scary!

We were only kept near the front line for a day or so, then Wilf, Louis, Harvey, Marcel Briere, the Army Doctor and myself were taken to Arnhem. The Dutch fellows were taken to a concentration camp. It is very hard to imagine the harsh treatment that the political prisoners had to endure. We had it very tough but they had it much worse. Whatever is written or shown in the movies about that time doesn't describe nearly how bad it really was. It is hard to imagine how hideous and horrible people can be, especially the Gestapo and the SS. There was also a group of Dutch civilians (NSB) who were German sympathisers (I think they were sadists to begin with.) When the Germans took over Holland the they jumped on the band wagon, expecting the Germans to win. They were arrogant and cruel to their own countrymen, such as the Underground, who opposed the German occupation.

In Arnhem we were held in a house that the Germans had taken over after the paratroopers came. The windows and doors were barred, and there were security guards for each cell. My guard was a German airman who was not an SS type, and he was fed up with the war. He wasn't flying because they didn't have any aeroplanes to fly. Hitler and some of his generals had a big disagreement about defence, especially Rommel and Hitler. Hitler was the Supreme Commander so he decided to cut the Air Force and spend their budget on the V-2 Rocket

(Revenge Weapon#2), a self-propelled Rocket which they could guide to a target. It was not very accurate. Hitler and his close advisers called it their secret weapon and had great hopes that it would win the war.

The Germans produced a lot of propaganda, continuing the attitude that they were going to win the war, right up to the very end. So, here was my guard, an experienced pilot, doing duty as a security guard and he didn't like it. We used to compare stories about bombing each other's country; he had bombed England and I had bombed Germany. He was very nice and we talked a lot, but I never said anything that I didn't want the interrogators to know.

Our interrogators were another species altogether. By this time we had attracted the more senior interrogators and they were much meaner. As soon as I gave my name, rank and number, they knew who I was. They told me when I had been shot down and where my crew was buried. They knew I had been on the loose for seven months. They knew what squadron I was from and where we were bombing the night we were shot down. However, their main purpose was to know where the Dutch Underground had taken care of me and who they were. The Dutch Underground was a thorn in their side, which is why they put them in concentration camps and treated them cruelly. They shot many and all were tortured. As prisoners we were fed very little; they had the starvation diet down to a science. They gave us just enough so we wouldn't starve to death. A cup of ersatz coffee for breakfast, a bowl of

watery cabbage soup for lunch and sometimes a piece of very black sourdough bread at night. They would interrogate us at any time, day or night.

The doctor, a British Army medical officer who was captured with us, was also being held in the same house as us. He was tough and kept himself perfectly dressed. Only an Englishman could keep himself so clean under these circumstances. He slept on a straw mat and at night he would lay his pants under them so they would keep a press. He had a double guard as he was always trying to escape, whether it was practical or not. He was determined to keep as many Germans busy as possible. He had a little more freedom to do things than we had, as he was a major, and had been captured in uniform and with ID. The Germans were not threatening to shoot him and treated him as a proper POW. It was his duty to try and escape.

I had been in Holland for the longest time and could guess what the Germans were saying, as the language is similar to Dutch. Therefore I was chosen as spokesman. Each room had a small coke stove in it and my job was to go around and clean out the ashes. The advantage to this was that most of the guards couldn't speak or understand English. I would pretend to talk to the guard but really would be talking to the fellow in the room. In this way we kept in contact and told each other about what was going on, but one had to be very careful. We saw how they had treated Dirk and we didn't want the same treatment.

We were guarded by the Wermacht. These were regular German soldiers who were fed up with the war and had never been Nazi fanatics. Even they were afraid of the SS and the Gestapo. However, we were interrogated by SS troops who wore a black uniform including skull and cross bones emblem on their hat. They also wore long black leather coats and I still have strong feelings whenever I see a long black coat. The feeling still goes through me today. They also wore a big red swastika on their arm. They were hard-core Nazis and had a lot of power, taking their orders directly from Himmler.

We were also interrogated by the Gestapo. They wore civilian clothes and were even worse. I think everybody was afraid of them. The Gestapo seemed to have power over everyone, but there also appeared to be quite a lot of power struggles between themselves and the SS. The Gestapo wanted information on the Underground movement while the SS concentrated more on the military. The Secrete Service, who interrogated us after the Field Army Police (Feld-Gendarmerie), we never saw again. I think they were the secret police within the army.

Wilf's arm was seen by a doctor here. He took the bullet out and put his arm in a cast, and used a paper bandage. I guess that was all that they had. You would never guess what a great advantage that paper bandage was! We had nothing to smoke but we would gather up cigarette butts, pull some of the paper bandage out of the dressing on Wilf's arm and use it to roll a cigarette. As time went on, Wilf's arm got thinner with the lack of food and, with us

pulling the bandage out of his cast, his cast was eventually just flopping around, very loose. I can't remember how we got it off, I think it fell off!

We began to be interrogated more and more, at all different times of the day. We were asked the same questions, over and over. Our interrogators would then check back to what we had said the time before. At times they would eat a large meal in front of us and do different things like that to increase the stress. They loved to blow smoke in our face as we never had any cigarettes. I was very surprised that these SS often had American cigarettes. We were pushed around quite a bit, whacked across the head a few times, but we were never tortured like the civilians were.

They kept referring to us as spies and threatened to shoot us many times. They always let us know that we had no rights under the Geneva Convention. They would talk about my crew and my squadron. They would ask about things that had happened in 419 Squadron such as where I flew from and asked questions about other crews who had been shot down. They would talk about the pub near the squadron, trying to get a conversation going. We treated it as a big jigsaw puzzle, and searched for all the little pieces to fit into it. They would try to talk about Canada and where I was from. They tried to get you relaxed, as if it didn't matter what you said, as small as it may be. We always apologised and told them that we could only give them our name, rank and number. They would then yell at us, "You

have no rights," and get really mad. However, I told them the same story, over and over.

My story was that I didn't know where I had landed in Holland, that I had met a farmer and lived in his barn. I had lived by myself, never talked to anybody and never knew where I was. I would have to go over the exact description of the room I had slept in and the barn, everything down to the last detail. The farmer never spoke English, I couldn't speak Dutch and he was too afraid to have me meet anyone. I memorised this story. Every night I would go over and over it. I couldn't miss one detail, each time I told my story it had to be exactly the same. I would make a visual picture of the farmyard and the room in the barn where I slept. I went over it so often that I began to believe it myself. They never believed it and let me know in a very violent way. Often by a whack on the head and telling me that I could be shot. We figured that as long as we didn't talk they wouldn't shoot us. If we did talk, many good Dutch people would have been shot as well as ourselves, as then they would have nothing to keep us alive for.

My mother had given me a wrist watch when I joined the Air Force. It was the most valuable thing I had. Every mother should give their child a good watch when they leave home. I could always hock it and get $5.00 when I was broke. The German guards also wanted it, so I would hide it in many places. A few times they tried to take it, but I would pretend that they just wanted to know the time. If they got too aggressive, I would say, "Come see, Officer". I kept

this watch all through the war and then lost it digging a ditch in Langley when I was an apprentice plumber a year after the war.

The SS and the Gestapo were very well organised. They had an excellent cross reference system in their intelligence. Once, I was being interrogated at three or four o'clock in the morning and the interrogator was big and as mean as usual. I had gone over my story three or four times with him. He questioned me on many points, on the way I had been living in Holland and especially who I had talked to. I knew he was after something, but I couldn't figure out what. He kept shuffling this bunch of papers on his desk and I couldn't see what they were! I remembered I had a blank piece of paper in my pocket when I was captured and I had made up a story about it. I was concerned that I might have written something on the page before and that the pencil had marked through to the next page. Maybe they had some way of reading that. I couldn't remember the story I had told him, about what I thought might be on the paper, but at the time I thought it sounded good. I couldn't think of anything else to say. He wasn't very pleased with that story. Suddenly he reached over his desk, gave me a real hard blow on the ear, called me "a Goddam liar," and just glared at me. I didn't have time to duck as it came as a complete surprise. He was looking down at the papers on his desk, moved one over and there was a letter that I had written months ago. It was a letter to my mother written on tissue paper. I had drilled a hole down the body of a wooden comb, rolled the

note up, put it in the hole, made a plug and plugged the hole. I refinished the comb and gave it to an Underground courier who was going across the German lines, with information for the Allies. He'd said, "I will mail it at British Headquarters when I get there." We never heard from him again but I figured he had made it. I had said in the letter that I had been playing crib all day with a Roger Schjelderup, from Courtney BC, and could she please phone his mother to tell her that we were both alive and well?" My story to the Germans had always been the same, that I had lived alone in a barn, on a farm, and saw no one. The interrogator was wild and I thought he was going to come after me again. Lucky for me he was tired and cranky, as it was the middle of the night. He physically kicked me, threw me out of the office and bellowed for the guard to take me back to my cell.

The courier must have been caught because they found the comb with all the other papers. If we were smart enough to put the letter in the comb, they were smart enough to find it. I didn't have much time to think about what had happened to the courier, but I was certain it wasn't very nice. He would have been severely tortured for information and then shot or put in a concentration camp. They would slap such prisoners across the head and ears until they bled, then they broke their fingers one by one. This would be kept up hour after hour, with no let up. They were given almost no food and, if lucky, slept on a cement floor. The Dutch Underground accepted and worked for their country with no pay,

no recognition and as no one knew what they were doing, in most cases ended up without any thanks. I will always have enormous respect for the Dutch people and I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for them.

I had a lot to think about when I got back to my cell. I decided I was going to stick to my story and only change it by adding Roger into it. I didn't have a clue where Roger was. He may have been caught and was being held someplace else, or he may have been killed along with the others, or by some miracle maybe he may have gotten through to the British lines. I was going to go with the premise he wasn't around and make up my own story. I only had one more interrogation with this interrogator and although he didn't believe me, it was the only story I had and I stuck to it. Arnhem was close to the front line, so they only kept us in this location for a week or so. We were then moved by truck to a big prison in Utrecht called "Wolvenplein Prison" where we were very well guarded, one for each of us. They knew I had spent the last seven months around there, someplace, and that I knew a little of the language. They were not taking any chance on us making a run for it, but we never got the chance. The prison was run by the German SS. It held only political prisoners, Dutch civilians who had been caught doing something against the Germans. Ans Middelkoop was a prisoner here at the same time but I did not know that until after the war. She had a very bad time. Her son Kees had been taken away from her. I believe if anyone was arrested for other crimes they

were sent directly to Germany to work in the forced labour camps. Later, an older man was put in with me (who couldn't speak a word of English) but, because I was there first, I had the bunk and he had to sleep on the floor. He often thought I could understand him and would talk on and on in Dutch. I guess he was also frightened and had no one else to talk to.

Fig. 6c The Jail in Utrecht I was in Jan. 1945

Some days we would be let out of our cells for ten minutes or so and were allowed to walk around a fenced-in yard, but not for very long. It was a wired-in area about fifteen feet long and six feet wide, with brick walls on two sides and wire mesh at the ends and over the top as a roof. This was our exercise yard. We were interrogated most days and nights and the interrogators were getting meaner and meaner. I never saw the other prisoners and didn't

know if they were still there or not. I felt alone in the world. There was a Dutch worker cleaning up around the prison. He spoke good English and would talk to me sometimes while he was working. I thought I would take a chance and talk to him.

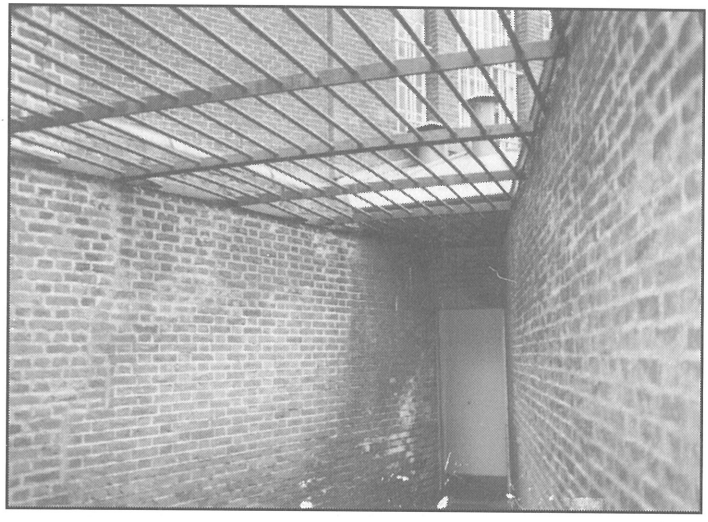

Fig.6d Exercise area. We may have 10 minutes a day here

He said, "I know a few people in the Underground. Maybe I can get you some help." I replied that I don't know anyone's name or where they lived. "Would you ask the ones you know if anyone knows me? " I asked, hoping that someone. I had met would get the message to Rakers. I continued, "If they do, would they pass the word around that I'm here and I'd really like to get out?" I was getting anxious thinking that maybe they would shoot me,

as they claimed they had the right to. There would often be shooting in the next room and they would say, "See!" They had threatened me enough times. The only way they might be able to get me out was to send me a "Diphtheria sandwich." I had seen Rakers do it before. Rakers would make arrangements with Slim, an orderly in the hospital, to take diphtheria germs from a patient's throat and put them in a vial. Next Rakers would make a sandwich and put the germs in it. He would then send the sandwich to the prisoner they wanted to get out, hoping he would get diphtheria. The Germans were very afraid of this disease and would send the prisoner to a hospital. The Underground could get him out once he was in the hospital. It sounds drastic but these were tough times and I was worried that our captors would turn nastier and nastier.

I could stand up on the window sill and look out the little window. I was sure I could see De Baai's house, the first people I lived with in Utrecht. It seemed so close but so far away. The cells were very small and bare. A cot was on one side and there was a bucket in the corner. No washing facilities at all. I had been imprisoned for at least three weeks and had not yet seen a place to wash.

One day, after a week or so, I was taken out of my cell as if I was going for interrogation or just to the exercise yard, but instead I was put in a truck with some others. We didn't have to pack or pick up anything as we had no possessions, absolutely nothing. There were a couple of guards with machine guns and I don't think they would have hesitated to use

them. Wilf, Louis, Harvey and Marcel were there. This was the first I had seen of them since we were brought from Wolvenplein. It gave me a great feeling to know I was no longer totally alone. The German guards shouted something nasty and we agreed it had meant, "No talking," so we didn't. Some of them never seemed to have a sense of humour.

We headed out of Utrecht, towards Hilversum, right past Rakers' house in Groenekan where I had lived for seven months. Wilf and the others had lived up the road at Bilthoven. We dared not look at the house or even at each other. The thought ran through my head that maybe they knew something and they were just testing us. We kept going and nothing came of it. The truck we were in was fuelled by some sort of wood gas with a wood burner in the back. They had to keep it burning to produce the gas to keep us going. At this time the Germans didn't have much gasoline and what they did have was kept for the army at the front lines. This wood-burning truck was their transportation. The Germans were constantly looking around, watching for Allied fighter bombers. They came from out of nowhere. If we saw one, we just jumped out of the truck and ran like hell, with the guards right behind us.

We drove for a few hours, then stopped and were taken into a big building with a lot of Dutch civilian prisoners, all standing in rows, who also seemed to have just been brought in. They were being guarded by the NSB. One of the prisoners fell over, talked or did something--I'm not sure what. Whatever it was,

the guards reacted very quickly. Two of the NSB started to shout and yell. They pushed the Dutchman out of the room and when they brought him back a little while later, he had been beaten up severely, with his eyes half closed and his face swollen. It was awful, but it made us think and watch what we were doing. We decided that there was no sense of humour here!

We had no idea why we were there but late that afternoon we were loaded back into the truck along with a few of the Dutch civilians. Now we had both the German guards and the NSB. They were shouting a lot, so we sat quietly. We hadn't had anything to eat since the small piece of bread from the night before, and it didn't look like we were going to get anything to eat today. This wasn't the time to talk about our rights. They kept saying, "At the next place there will be something to eat," but we never did get anything that day.