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# Many Little Sparrows Fell from the Rooftops

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by Nicholas B. Knoppers

**S**uffering and survival. When I was ready to enter the ministry in the Reformed churches in The Netherlands about 50 years ago, I had no survival kit with me. I had not even given any thought to what survival might mean. It was different with suffering. I had read many books and articles on suffering. Thus entering the ministry, I took with me a bag full of rationales for the problem of suffering. I had all the answers.

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*Rev. Knoppers lives in Edmonton, Alberta, and is pastor emeritus in the Christian Reformed Church. This article is the Suffering and Survival convocation address given at Dordt College, September 27, 1990.*

Five days in May, 1940, and five long, long years which followed made me stop trying to explain suffering. In those days and years I learned to cry out to God with the Psalmist: "Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" Until that time I enjoyed the good life in that small country overseas. True, there were a few restrictions and a few shortages. But that was all. There were rumors of camps in Germany, but they were, so many of us thought, not concentration camps but labor camps, mainly for criminals. Since 1933 when Adolph Hitler came to power, German Jews—hundreds of them—had been moving to our country to get away from the Nazi gang. Some moved on to England, to Canada, and to the United States, but many stayed with us. They felt safe in The Netherlands, historically a land of refuge and hospitality, a land with a rich heritage of Portuguese Jews and French Huguenots. What we did not know at that time, however, was that many German Jews *had* to stay with us because the ships filled with hundreds of them were refused entrance at the ports of England, Canada, and the United States, thanks to a selfish, obscene quota system. The ships had to return to western Europe. This ultimately meant death in the gas chambers of the Nazi empire. We still have to be ashamed of this crime committed by the free world.

Then it was May 10, 1940, and my world of rationales and certainties collapsed. German troops had crossed the border and paratroopers were landing at all the air fields. The next morning I went downtown in Amsterdam, the cosmopolitan capital of The Netherlands, a center of culture and commerce, a city of churches and synagogues. I had a

cup of coffee close to the main square called “De Dam”—I wanted to know, of course, the latest. A German plane appeared and a bomb came whistling down. Two dead, many injured, enormous destruction. I was scared to death. I quote a poet about that day:

#### The First Bomb-Drop in the Heart of Amsterdam

A gull lay motionless in the canal  
Which mirrored gables and wrinkled  
Window panes and women. Barges  
Were lying ripe with flowers.

I’ve known this city many years  
Where birds swim in the water;  
A man with friends, love, future,  
Lives his life there confidently.

I saw the hotel of my one-night stand,  
The room, the view on Dam Square,  
Moonlight staring into my windows.

Then a shadow slid into the canal,  
Flew straight above Amsterdam:  
The last town where there were Jews.<sup>1</sup>

Next day was Sunday—Pentecost. The feast of harvest, the feast of nature in full bloom. For me the feast of the coming of the Holy Spirit was symbolized by a dove—the messenger of world-wide peace between God and humans. I can’t remember whether I, who customarily went to church at least twice, attended church at all. Maybe in all the fear and panic there were no services. Two days later Nazi bombs rained on Rotterdam. Nine hundred killed, thousands injured, 78,000 made homeless. Twenty-one churches and four hospitals destroyed. One day later the Dutch army in Fortress Holland laid down its arms. On that day, as on the days before, more than 100 Jews committed suicide, among them a man I highly respected: Dr. Eduard Broekman, the alderman for education in Amsterdam, a noble humanist and socialist. Among the non-Jews ending their life were poets and artists like Menno Ter Braak, who for years had warned against Nazism and Fascism. But many of us, Christians included, had no ears to hear.... These five days cost The Netherlands more than 5000 people, dead or injured.

In the five years to follow, these 5000 became millions and millions in Europe, Asia, and North

America. Apart from what still can happen in the Middle East, this century will go down in history as the bloodiest one: 150 to 200 million people were victims of the lust for power, the urge for greed, or the fanaticism for a totalitarian state or a religious system.

Two weeks later, I was in church and listened to a sermon on Matthew 10:29b: “Many little sparrows fall from the rooftop, but no one without the will of your Father in heaven.” To be honest, I began to have my doubts about that. Thousands, millions of innocent people falling like little sparrows from the rooftop, and that was the will of God? No way!

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### *A German plane appeared and a bomb came whistling down.*

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My bag full of rationales for the problem of suffering was coming apart at the seams. What were our sufferings? I would like to mention a few of them. First, we were suffering in being occupied as a country by a godless enemy and system. People in the States and Canada do not know what this means. Thank God for that! Yes, Canadians and Americans fought for our liberation. They paid with many lives for that liberation. And I shall never forget the Sherman tanks with Canadian crews thundering through our hamlet on April 16, 1945. That night my wife gave birth to our oldest son, who received an extra name—Victor. Yet, in two world wars, Americans and Canadians fought battles on foreign soil, never in their own country, and it makes all the difference. In the Dutch national anthem, which has the depth and tone of a church hymn, the sixth stanza ends with a prayer:

That I may stay a pious  
servant of Thine for aye  
and drive the tyranny  
which pierces my heart away.

This occupation was *tyranny*.

Part of the Dutch heritage was the freedom of speech, of religion, of education, regardless of race and color. That freedom was taken away step by step.

I remember what happened at the state university in Leiden where I took a few extra courses. This university was founded in 1575 during the war of

independence against Spain. Among the ten professors who were dismissed by the Nazis because they were Jews was a law professor, Dr. Meyers, a renowned scholar and a true defender of justice. In the great auditorium, filled to capacity with students and professors, the dean of the faculty of law openly denounced the German action and praised his dismissed colleague. His final, moving words were these: "We have to carry the yoke of oppression, but we will wait and hope and trust and hold in our hearts the image of him about whom we believe that he ought to stand here behind this lectern, and who, God willing, one day will return to this lectern." A moment of hush was followed by a thunderous applause, and then a student started the national anthem, closing with that prayer I quoted about driving out tyranny. The Germans closed the university for the duration of the war. The dean was arrested and jailed. Dr. Meyers survived and was honored after the war with the mandate to review the Dutch constitution. With sacrifices like these the heritage of freedom of education was defended.

And there was my teacher in German at a Christian high school in Amsterdam. He had joined the underground movement fighting what he called "the anti-Christian powers of today" who were trying to wipe out any and all humaneness. He was caught and sentenced to be shot. In his last letter to his wife and his five kids, and to us as his friends, he wrote: "I am in a dirty cell with a man also facing the squad tomorrow morning for his resistance against the occupier. He told me that he was an unbeliever. We talked, we differed, we debated, we struggled until late at night he surrendered to Jesus as his Savior and Lord. Together we were on our knees and prayed for personal pardon, for forgiveness for our enemies, and for strength to face the squad with uplifted head. Know, beloved, that at that moment not one but two believers will journey to heaven." The letter ended: "Through Him, Jesus Christ, we are always of good cheer."

Like sparrows they fell from the rooftop. . . .

And many more sparrows followed.

There was the group called the Seventy-Two. All were involved in resistance action for the sake of democracy and freedom of the country. They were betrayed and arrested. Goering, one of Hitler's top butchers, ordered to have them shot "like dogs."

A war poem reads:

#### The Execution of the Seventy-Two

A round of fire—the deed just a bullet  
And no one knows who shall bury them—  
In view of eternity it's very few  
Only seventy-two.

They were proud to serve their country  
—Strong they felt in their unity—  
Their love was their shield and trust,  
Only seventy-two.

They thought that no power could prevent them,  
—the freedom of the country was at stake—  
Great is the joy in sacrifice  
Only seventy-two.

A round of fire—their task no mercy found,  
But woe to those who do forget—  
In view of eternity it's very few—  
Only seventy-two.<sup>2</sup>

Several of my friends who were caught were tortured. Their suffering is beyond description. Only a few, a very few extraordinary, graced people came through it unscathed. What a human can do to another human to get every name and every plan out into the open is hellish. People have called this yielding "betrayal." Resistance fighters have suffered from this accusation until the day of their death. That's why I'm very thankful to Hugh Cook for his book *The Homecoming Man* because he does not make the main character a hero who stood up until the end, able to withstand the torture. No, he pictures a man being tortured and tortured until he finally gives in. When his nails are ripped off, he rasps the names of leaders of an underground cell. So it happened. So it still goes. Amnesty International confirms such torture daily from all over the world. And if it would have come down to such barbaric extremes, I would have gone down too.

In those years, I had become the pastor of a rural church in Friesland, one of the northern provinces. The church was solidly Reformed. Yes was yes, and no was no. Only two colors existed: black and white. Gray was out of the question: The hamlet was called "The English Village" because British and American pilots who had come down on the way to Germany were given a hiding place. We kept radio sets we were not allowed to have because the Nazis knew the power of the media. But we listened every night to the BBC and especially to Radio

Orange for news from the free world, introduced by the first bars from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. It was music from heaven in our ears, even though in the first years the music sounded more than once as a "marche funbre." Couriers, mostly females, honor to them, distributed the news printed on machines stolen from Dutch offices collaborating with the Nazis. Some of them were caught, jailed, and tortured. They, too, fell like "little sparrows from the rooftop."

Our hamlet also became the hiding place for many young people who did not want to register for labor in war factories in Germany. It became a refuge for young adult Jews. They were in hiding and could not come into the open because they looked Jewish. But I remember one exception. I came into contact with a Jewish young man from Amsterdam with blond hair, high blond hair like so many Friesians. Taking a risk with fear and trembling—I placed him, as one of the other "Aryan" young adults who refused to work in the war factories, with the janitor's family next to the parsonage without telling them that this young man was a Jew. In this way he survived in the "open," but it must have been hard on him. People did not mean ill with their sick, racial jokes, and anti-Semitic smears in his presence. My friend had to laugh along with them. That hurt.

We needed German stamps on documents covering illegal food transports to the hungry in Amsterdam. We needed ration books and identification cards for those in hiding. To meet these needs my code of ethics as taught in catechism classes went by the wayside. We printed books, cards, and letterheads with German eagles ourselves. We manufactured impressive stamps. And so we became masters in forgery. In the beginning it bothered me. Were we not bearing false witness? Were we not stealing? Were we not lying when we were interrogated about hiding and distributing illegal bulletins and flatly denied it, even under oath?

Mentioning this, I touch our suffering in the struggle about the nature of truth. What is truth?

Until that time it was so simple. Truth is reality, what you see and hear. Tell it as it was and is. Some of us with a tender conscience held that if we'd be asked whether we had someone in hiding, we ought to tell the truth if it was so, trusting that God would take care of the consequences. Some of us would make an exception for "white lies" and emergency

lies. But lies still are lies. With prayer and study we learned that our words and actions never stand on their own. They are always related. For a Christian this means our words are related and must be related to God and our neighbor. Who were our neighbors in those war years? Not the Nazis. They were our enemies who wanted to use our words and deeds to get us and people-in-hiding and Jews into their murderous hands. But exactly these people had placed themselves under our protection. *They* were our neighbors. In that way we related our words for God's sake and their sake to them. So we said "no" to the enemy which meant a "yes" to these

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neighbors, bearing true witness to them. It was telling the truth in a biblical light.

It was the same with "false" documents and "stealing."

In the final year of the war, hunger was caused by the enemy's plunder, especially in the western part of Holland, the cities. There was no gas, no power, no coal, and the people lived in fear of razzia air raids. They were in the icy grip of the winter and, most of all, of hunger. The communal kitchens could not help, so older people frequently collapsed in the endless lineup for the kitchen. The mortality rate doubled within one year. People, children too, died like flies in the thoroughfare, their bodies strewn on the road or on the floor of an empty church like old cinders. Hunger changes the best relationships; it changes humans into animals—parents stealing the bread out of their children's mouths and children wishing their parents would die so that they could get their bread rations. Just as it says in Job, "All a person has he will give for his life," for survival.

In the district of our hamlet in Friesland, where we still had an abundance of dairy products, was a cheese factory. Every time its warehouse was filled, the Germans came and took all the cheese away for themselves or for transport to Germany. We decided to be ahead of the Germans, who always came on Monday morning. We said we'd go there on the Saturday night before by way of a canal

leading to the factory. We organized an armada of small boats, each boat pulled by two people on the path along the canal with a tow line around their waists. Several elders and deacons took part in the raid. Leading the pack were two elders, and instead of a New Testament, each had a hand grenade in his pocket—just in case. On each boat we had a resistance fighter with a stengun—just in case. So we pulled the boats for ten kilometers. That took two hours. The warehouse was emptied in three hours, and we were on the way back with tons of cheese. It was quite a job! But then the question: where to hide the cheese for the weekend? Well, in the attic of the church. The wooden floor of the attic groaned under the weight of all the cheese. We finished just before dawn, exhausted from the toil and tension.

Only a few hours later the morning service began. Everybody who had been in the raid was present with the elders in a pew alongside the pulpit and the deacons on the other side along the pulpit. On the day following, I called on a widow. She was quite upset: “Dominie, our world in war is already under the judgment of God. Will that judgment now come to the church too?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Dominie, yesterday even the elders and deacons were sleeping. Terrible!” It was true, most elders and deacons had difficulty staying awake. They were exhausted from lack of sleep. And they dozed off, of course, *before* the sermon. What kept me awake was that I had to deliver the sermon. What could I say to this dear sister? Not that above her thousands of pounds of cheese were piled up, with my silent prayer that the angels would keep the supporting beams from collapsing.

This cheese business had to remain secret. So I tried to comfort her with nonsense like “Maybe, sister, a cow had to give birth to a calf in the night.” “Hmm,” she snapped, “that never happened to seven farmers in our village in the same night.” And then she ended with: “The judgment is at hand, beginning with the house of God.” All the cheese arrived in Amsterdam with false papers and became a blessing in survival for many kids and elderly.

On April 16, 1945, it was over for me. But not for the millions of the Dutch in western Holland in the big cities. I faced, unexpectedly, one of the most painful tragedies. Let me tell you about a youth of 19 years. Let me call him Dave. He came from Rot-

terdam; he belonged to a fine Christian family with two children—a girl and a boy. Dave refused to register to work in a war factory in Germany. He did not want to join this enemy of Christ in one way or another. With the prayer support of his parents he went into hiding on one of the isolated farms in my church. The enemy never found him. In the last year of the war he had enlisted in the underground movement and was very active in the resistance against the Hitler gang. He was neither caught nor wounded.

Then, on April 16, 1945, our hamlet was liberated by the Canadian tank troops. Dave was safe and could come out of hiding. He had survived! But a few weeks later—Rotterdam was not liberated yet—Dave was cleaning his stengun, which was loaded but not secured. A blast followed. Dave was killed on the spot. A few days later I found myself seated in an old station wagon with a Red Cross sign, and next to me was the casket. Traveling all the way south to Rotterdam, I reached the city, which was in a jubilant mood because that part of the Netherlands was now liberated too. Everywhere there were flags and banners. I came to an upper apartment, draped with victory signs and a big sign: “Dave, Welcome Home!” I rang the bell to tell the parents the sad news that I had Dave with me in a casket. Years in hiding for the sake of God and the country, safe, liberated. Then after the first joys of survival being alive!—dead, finished. There was no way for me or anyone else to explain that. Dave was one more “little sparrow fallen from the rooftop.”

I read for the umpteenth time the text in Matthew 10, and I consulted the Greek New Testament on this verse, and I made the discovery of my life! I did not find in the final words of verse 29 anything about God’s will. I noticed that this text simply reads, as the King James has it, “Not one of the sparrows will fall to the ground without your Father.” “Without your Father”—that is all! It liberated me from all false ideas about God as a cruel God who wanted, who willed the death of this young man. And it gave me unspeakable comfort! A little sparrow falls to the ground, but not one of them falls dead without God—without our Father present, knowing.

Millions of sparrows fell to the ground in World War II, and among these dead were many Christians, but it was not—and it is not—God’s will!

God's will is that we survive, that we live free from the tyranny of totalitarian powers! His will is that we have life, and life in abundance. When the enemy, the devil and his followers, hit a child of God and he falls to the ground and we say, "Dead,"

<sup>1</sup> *Geuzenliedboek*, III, p. 29. Translated by John Struyk.

there is the Father just in time to catch him or her and to lead him or her from the depth of death to the resurrection light of the morning sun! Sparrows still fall. Remember, not one falls without Him who is our Father in Jesus Christ.

<sup>2</sup> *Geuzenliedboek*, III, p. 34. Translated by John Struyk.