

DID LIBERATION BRING A BETTER WORLD?

by Diet Eman

FIFTY YEARS AGO this past Friday—May 5, 1945—the Netherlands was liberated from Nazi Germany. Three days later, May 8, victory was declared in Europe, ending World War II there.

It is still difficult to describe the emotions we felt when the Allies arrived in the Netherlands. First we felt immense gratitude to God, then an indescribable relief that the war was over. In every village and city, the church bells rang, and we held thanksgiving services with our liberators in crowded churches, in the open air, and in village squares. Many faces were wet with tears.

Liberation meant no more tyranny and no more of the fears we had felt for five years. We no longer had to fear that innocent hostages would be executed if the rest of us did something to displease the Nazi occupiers. Jewish people no longer had to fear discovery. The wives of Resistance fighters did not have to fear capture by Nazis trying to force the husbands out of hiding. We no longer had to fear saying the wrong word to the wrong person. Mothers did not have to fear that their children would starve. None of us had to cower in fear of bombardments.

In our new feeling of freedom, many of us were naive about this war. We thought that the past five years of great suffering would make the world a better place. In our united struggle against the invader, we'd given up living by the differences between religious groups and political parties. We had formed deep friendships that often surpassed family ties, friendships that would last a lifetime. We were sure this horror could never happen again.

Queen Wilhelmina reflected our hopes when she spoke to us on the first day of our regained freedom:

"At long last we are again the boss in our own home and our own hearth; beaten is the enemy, from east to west, from south to north; gone are the firing squads, the prisons, and concentration camps. Gone is the unspeakable oppression of the persecutor that has tortured you for five years; past is the horror of the famine."

After the war, we expected so much. The world *had* to be a better place. But were we realistic?

We were only human, and disappointments came. The country had to be rebuilt after the bombardments. But the Dutch way is very orderly, so our progress was slow. There were so many rules and regulations to observe. Maybe these were necessary, but we looked at our neighbors in Belgium, and things seemed to move so quickly there. People griped. Many immigrated to



Canada because the lack of housing in Holland was terrible. Couples who got married were placed on a waiting list for a place to live. Many had to live with their parents, often until they had two children. Still, slowly but surely, things got better. The country recovered.

What Was It Good For?

If the world did not become a better place, were the lives of those who died in the war given in vain? What can we learn as we look back?

We see how the war brought out the best in people's character. Simple, unknown men and women did heroic things, not to be rewarded but to stay true to their God and to themselves. They were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice, and many did. They knew the danger, but they obeyed their consciences. Many others who could not help actively because of health or nerves

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did other deeds of love and sacrifice, such as sharing food and clothing. Everything was more intense: friendships, happiness, love—and yes, even hate.

We see, too, the compassion of a nation. One fear that remained after liberation was whether our loved ones whom the Nazis had taken would return. Many did not. And when we knew how many would not return, the whole country united and formed the "Stichting 1940-1945." Everyone contributed money, which the Dutch government supplemented. These funds were invested and used to make sure that the widows and orphans of those who paid the highest price would never suffer poverty on top of their great loss. The Stichting is still taking care of many.

Looking back at those years of terror, we can only say, Thank God for the precious gift of freedom. **B**

Diet Eman, a member of Seymour Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Mich., was a Resistance worker in the Netherlands during World War II. She is co-author of Things We Couldn't Say. An excerpted version of her story appeared in The Banner in November and December 1993.