

## **Elsbeth van der Merwe - Biographical Notes**

My name is Elsbeth Maria van der Merwe (nee Steintjes) and I was born in Dusseldorf, 6 January 1934. I believe humans should strive for balance, and live in the present (Keep your attention on the working surfaces).

Timeline: born – 1934, second world war – 1939 (5 years), father died – 1942 (8 years), end of war – 1945 (11 years), met Willem, mother died – 1955, move to SA

### **Familie Steintjes**

I was born Steintjes, which actually comes from the Dutch. My great grandfather came from Holland and he married a French woman. They were living on the Belgian Dutch border and she was French, or French speaking. Maybe she was Belgian, I'm not sure. Then the name was Steentjes, and he changed it to Steintjes, because it sounded more German. Steentjes means little pebbles. And then his wife died, so he came to Germany with his son to look for work on the coal mines, as his brother was already there. Later he became a jockey, racing horses - he apparently became quite well to do and bought a house in a nice suburb. But somehow he lost it all again, I just knew that he had dumped his son with his brother and he only appeared now and then and I always wondered why. The son that was dumped with his brother was my father's father. My father was born in 1897.



### **Familie Emschermann**

My mothers name was Emschermann, Hedwich Emschermann. The Emschermann's lived in Bottrop and they had farms. They could trace their family back to very long ago. My mother's father was a business man, he had a restaurant and a shop and he sold fertilisers. And then he tried to build houses and that bankrupted him. And that was one of my mothers earliest memories, having to go to houses and say her father cannot pay the bills, it was terrible. I think she must have been about 18 or 19 at the time, she was born in 1903. That happened in the 1920's, after the war, a lot of people went bankrupt then. My mother's mother died, they were eight children and her mother died with the birth of the youngest child, kind-bed fever they called it, it was an infection, like you get in hospitals, at that time they didn't know what caused it. Then my mother had to help look after the children. I think that her mothers death affected her badly, she said she ran out of the house and into a hiding place as she couldn't face it. And the bankruptcy also affected her, of course.

## Parents Marriage

My mother married when she was 30, she was already quite old, and I was her first child. It's terrible to say it but her father felt that my father came from a poorer family and they objected to the marriage. She also had to look after the children, even though her father had married again.

## Father

I don't know very much about my father. He was born 31 March 1897, and I can remember that he loved to go to the forest. There was a forest nearby and on a Sunday morning he took me to pick wild berries. I had a container and he said if it's full you can have an ice-cream, but I never managed to fill it, because we ate them in-between. But I got the ice-cream anyway.

He had a bicycle and I went with him on the bicycle. On Sunday mornings he took me to the park with his friends, where they drank beer, it was social. My mother said that he felt nearer to God in nature, he wasn't a church man or anything.

My father read a whole lot of German classic books which he bought on sale – old editions. He was quite interested in books. He was the life of the party when he went out with his cronies and he had a very good sense of humor. And that's one thing I remember, my mother said she was quite upset sometimes because she had three children and she had to stay at home and look after the children. And she said if he had just said to her, "it would have been nice if you had been with me or something", but he didn't say anything.

My father worked in a factory, at Demag, where he became a foreman. He was in the navy in both wars. In the first world war he worked with the Zeppelin airship as a mechanic. In the second world war he maintained the minesweepers operating between England and France. The last time he came home for a holiday he told my mother that he wouldn't come back, that he would die in the war. And then he died in 1941, around Christmas time. He died on land, the site where they were staying was bombed.

I was 5 when my father left to go to war and 7 when he died in 1941.



*My mother sent this photo of her, me, Helmut and Willi to my father but he died before he received it.*

## Mother

My Mother was born 30 August 1903 and I didn't know my mother as well as I would have liked to.

She was a caring person, as she had to care for her sisters and brothers. They came to her for help because she was the oldest. She was depressed for two years after my father died in the second world war. She had an easy laugh later on. Once I asked her "How do you know you are dead and how do dead people look." And she told me they stick out their tongue. So I stood there with my eyes closed and my tongue out but nothing happened. When she laughed, she held her hand in front of her mouth because she felt she didn't have nice teeth. My mother would read while she was knitting.

My mother was interested in the meaning of life but she was not very religious, as she lost her faith during the war. My parents were both Catholic, so she made us go to church but she didn't go to church. Later on Willie and Helmut and I just went to the park, and we didn't go to church. My mother read quite a lot and that must have helped her in a way. She could read whilst she was knitting. I know that the broader family talked about philosophy topics. My mother loved coffee – she really liked coffee – coffee and cake. At that stage everybody had these wooden coffee mills, with a little drawer and you put it between your knees and you sit there and grounded the coffee – it was a nice smell. She saved the grinds, she would brew later again from the same grinds.

She was an attractive women in her youth. Apparently she was quite a passionate woman. There were no other romantic interests after my father died, but she once told me that there is this doctor over there and he was very interested in her. I also asked her and she said first of all there were not many men left of that age and then also with three children it just wouldn't have worked. That was her rationale but I think she was not interested in any case. So there was nobody after my father died.

My mother told me a story about how strict her father was – to show that even though we thought she was strict, her father was even stricter. The story was that she came back from school and she couldn't find a penny that she had, which she needed to give back to him. She looked everywhere and it was gone. And then her father made her kneel in the corner – for hours. He thought she did something with the penny and she just said she couldn't find it. And then later on she found the penny, it was in an umbrella, when she opened the umbrella the penny fell out.

My mother died of cancer when I was 21. My mother was 52 when she died, in 1955. My





fathers family all lived very long. I think his mother died when she was 90, of old age. I don't know about his father. I know that the sisters on my fathers side and his brother all lived long. On my mothers side her father died of cancer and she also died of cancer and they were not that old. My mother had breast cancer and my oupa had throat cancer, he smoked as well.

When she died lots and lots of people came, and some of them I have never seen before.

## Childhood: Earliest memories

My earliest memory is when I was two – I know because I asked my mother “can you remember that?” and she said, “you were only two”. One night I woke up with terrible ear pain. I experienced it as a sudden awareness of this body, of being in this body and it felt to me that I came from far away, from another place. I reached consciousness in this body, with very bad ear pain, and I was screaming. My mother was trying to put something in my ear. It was in the big bed with my father on the other side. Then later on, he wanted to sleep because he had to go to work, so he went to sleep, so I went under the duvet but I couldn't stop screaming because my ear was so sore. I felt I had to be quiet because my father wanted to go to sleep.

The other memory was the first time I dressed myself. My father was sleeping and my mother was out. When my mother came back I had put a dress on, she said, “that is good but it is the wrong way around”. She should not have said “its the wrong way round”, because I had struggled to get my arm in, it was such a struggle to get it on.

I remember once we were shopping and suddenly my mother was not in the shop anymore and I was alone in that shop. And I screamed “where is my mother” and they wanted to give me a little house made of paper, consoling me, but that is not what I wanted. Eventually my mother appeared again.

## Childhood Toys

I can remember a small doll I had, with one arm missing and the hair all scraggly. My mother went to the station to fetch my father, because it was his last holiday from the war. I wasn't allowed to put the light on, because of the bombing, and she said, “wait for us, your father will come”. I was on the couch with the little doll next to me and I was sort of praying, “please make her alive”. I wanted the doll to be real - not to be a doll. And then my father arrived and



he was at the top of the stairs and he held out his arms but I couldn't go to him. He was like a stranger because I hadn't seen him for I so long. He said "come, come" and I couldn't! I was too shy.

I also had toys like a grocery shop, with little scales.

We played outside a lot and in Thüringen, we went swimming, not that I'm a good swimmer. We swam in a Taalsperre (tauerstelle) – where the river goes in and they dam it. I went with Ellen and sometimes Willi and Helmut went with me.

## Childhood home in Rotdornweg

I still remember the Demag house in Hassels. The house was semi detached, and there were two families in each block – we were downstairs and there was a family upstairs. There was a little patch of garden in the front and back and rabbits and a rabbit hutch my father built. It was near a forest where you could walk.

As a child we went to the forest. A whole bunch of us to play hide and seek and suddenly I found myself away from everybody else – I think I must have been 7 or 8 – and there were these men coming and I had a terrible fear. I don't know why, but I ran and ran and ran and in the end got out of the forest. It was a nightmare feeling.

There was this little shop and there was a man who always stood there and watched the children playing. He always had some sweets. It was a safe place for children to play on the streets, there were no cars or anything. My mother said to me, you don't take any sweets from him. He seemed kind of dodderly.

We had no pets apart from Rabbits. I think they were also eaten, but I saw them as pets.

## Christmas memories

Christmas was always a high time, as I think it is all across Germany. Christmas is a big family celebration with baking and Christmas trees. Apparently my father decorated the Christmas tree, and he had a tippie also, some brandy and sang and the door was closed while he was busy doing the Christmas tree. And we got these plates with sweets, but we also had apples and oranges on our plates and cookies, not only sweets. And nice food. And when you came into the room there were all these candles, and music, presents and it was just lovely.



*1942 Christmas with my brothers Willi and Helmut*

## Birthday memories

I was born a Catholic and they don't celebrate birthdays, they celebrate your name day, which for me is Elizabeth. So all the Elizabeth's have their name day on 19 November and then you got your presents and you had a little table with flowers and with presents.

My grandmother was Maria and great grandmother was Elizabeth. I don't know why my I was

Elsbeth and not Elizabeth. I didn't like my name, I felt always it is not so easy over the tongue. I always have to explain to people, Els-beth, Els- beth – and they cant get it right.

## School

I liked history and geography and I was quite good at essay writing. I wrote an essay and it won the first prize in the class. Then Helmut used the same essay and he also got a good mark.

I didn't enjoy Maths and Geometry (Raumlehre). Biology was also a good subject. Once, when we were in Thüringen, I had a biology teacher and he always wanted to be funny and he made jokes and I always laughed so hard. And I felt later on I didn't deserve the good marks I got because I thought I got them because I laughed at his jokes.

In Thüringen we went with the train to another town to get to school and had to walk 5km back along a Landstrasse (rural street). There were apple trees along the road so we took ages to get home. We ate the apples but they were not big- they were small apples.

## Visit with Heinrich Emschermann

I think it was when my brother was born that I went to stay with this great uncle Heinrich (my grandfathers brother). He was a priest in a little village in North Rhine. He took me to church in the evening one day and he kneeled there for a long time and then said to the side, to me, you don't have to stay the whole time, you can go now. So I went out and there was a cherry tree outside the church and it had beautiful cherries. And on a Sunday he said you don't have to go to mass now, you can sit in the cherry tree, listen to the music, listen to the mass and eat cherries. So I did that.

And I heard the music, sat in the cherry tree, ate cherries.

I learned to ride a bicycle for the first time there, I fell down quite a lot. And he had a housekeeper whose family lived nearby, and there were lots of children my own age and also younger. They played with me because I was the priest's relative and I made up stories for them. I always wanted to perform, and that's the first time I can remember making up a stage and performing a story. I cant remember what it was about.

At the house they made beersuppe – soup made of beer that was terrible.

I read through a whole book for the first time there - it was Pinocchio. It was really quite nice and there was also a forest nearby where we walked. That's the memory I have of Heinrich Emschermann – my grandfather's brother.



*My grandmother, Maria Brinkmann on left. Top row my grandfather Bernhard Emschermann, Heinrich Emschermann followed by other brothers and my great-grandfather in the bottom centre.*



## Second world war

My mother was a courageous women. During the war we were evacuated to Eastern Germany, they sent the mothers and children to the country because of the bombing. My mother and two of her sisters and a sister in law all went to a little village during the last three years of the war – Triebes in Thüringen. The evacuation was after my father died, after 1942.

### Trigger for the move to Thüringen...

My Tante Maria, my mothers sister, had a grocery store in an old house and one day the air raid sirens went off. This was around Christmas time 1942 (my father was already dead). We went into the cellar, which had a little window high up out onto the street. And the bombing came and it was terrible! The noise! And then people started screaming across the street – “Help”, “Help” – and I went to my mother and said “I don't want to die! I don't want to die!”

Tante Maria had a little baby, Carla. A bomb splinter just missed Carla as it went through the pram and then through another man and killed him. It gave me the fright of my life.

Afterwards when we went upstairs the top of the building was gone, it was bombed and it just stopped. Downstairs was still a ceiling, the top story of the



*My mother with two of her sisters, Maria and Gerti, after the bombing*

building was ruins. And across the street where there was a building, but it was gone, no building anymore. And the tram lines were standing in the air. And there was a jewelers shop with all the jewelery, but no one took anything. I think after that my mother decided to take the offer and go to Thüringen.

### Evacuation to Triebes (1942, aged 8)

Tante Maria and Tante Hilde, my mother's sisters and Tante Ellie my father's sister were also evacuated to Triebes. So there were four women, all family, in Triebes. Tante Ellie's husband was freed after the war. He was a church organist, so he couldn't have been a very tough soldier. He was released after the war so she went with her husband before the borders were closed, before the Russians came in. She had four children.

We all lived in other people's houses, they were obliged to take us in. We lived in a bakers house at the top of the bakery. The house was meticulously clean and I always tip toed up the stairs. We had three rooms and a kitchen at the top.

They had an outside toilet and no toilet in the house. One day there were these creeping white maggots. They were all over that little cement path, terrible, but it was for just a little while and then it was gone.

We got hot water from the bakery at the end of each week so we could all have a bath in a zinc tub. I was last in, but I didn't mind because I liked to be in the bath. The bath was really dirty after everybody bathed in it.

The bakers family were very friendly. They were older and there was also a grandmother living there. They had a son who was in Dresden at the end of the war and we saw all the airplanes coming over that razed Dresden to the ground. We didn't know why all the bombers were going overhead, the next day we heard that Dresden was razed to the ground. And her son died in that. There was always chaos that we couldn't figure out as it was happening, but heard about after a while. The bakers family son was killed as he was just coming back from fighting at the front.



*Mother's sister Maria, mother, Hilda Emschermann, stepmother Emschermann, Hilda (mother's sister)*

The area was really nice, it was a farming center and there was real snow in winter. There is no snow in Dusseldorf, it's more rainy. We had sledges and the slopes felt like very steep mountains as we went down on the sledges. In the summer there was lightning and thunder, we didn't have such climatic events in Dusseldorf. When I went back with Lilette, Triebes was a bit bigger than I remembered.

## **End of the war, escape to the West**

After the Russians came we went back to Dusseldorf. First the Americans came to Triebes but Britain and France came to an agreement that Germany was to be divided, Thüringen was to be part of the Russian side. It was very lively when the Americans came, they came with jeeps and music and the smell of petrol. I can remember that because there were not many cars in Thüringen, so the smell of petrol was part of the Americans. They gave the children chewing gum but my mother said I mustn't accept anything from them. I had never seen a black man in my life before, and there was a black man and three other Americans. We were a whole group of children and they were smiling and talking and they offered us this chewing gum. At first I didn't want to take it but I took it in the end and we divided it between us.

When the Russians came in to Triebes there was no warning, - We just looked out of the window and the Americans were gone and there the Russians came, and there were columns and columns of them. The Americans had had jeeps and tanks and everything but the Russians had ox wagons with cannons on the back of the ox wagons. And their uniforms didn't look as shiny as the American uniforms, they looked a bit tatty. And some of them didn't know toilets, they drank out of the toilets. When they came you sometimes heard people in the night screaming, women screaming too. That's probably why I knew what they wanted to do with my mother. And there were some German communists, during the war



they went to communist Russia and they came back from Russia and they said everyone must have a white towel or a white sheet out of the window as a sign of surrender and my mother said "no, she's not going to do that". And my brother Willie heard that your head would be chopped off, or something terrible would happen, if you didn't have a white towel. He was frightened, so he got an old dirty kitchen towel and hung it out of the window.

My mother decided to flee over the newly created border after the Russians took over. The border was already an iron curtain. It was 1945, I was 11 years old and my brothers Helmut and Willie were six and seven. My mother told us that each child could only take one treasured possession. I took a tiny doll tea set made out of china. My mother and I went first. Someone in the village told my mother where to cross the border and she made friends with another woman who had a son, so the four of us went over the border in the middle of the night.

First we went through a forest and the moon was shining bright and we walked a while and my mother kept exploring the way ahead. We had to cross an open space and at the end of that open space was a river and over that river we were in the American zone (West Germany). While we were crossing the open space suddenly the Russians came and they shouted "Stoi! Stoi! Stoi!", so we just stood there and they went through our baggage. They took a big salami and I had this little tea set and I showed that to the Russians, I thought that must soften their hearts because they must have children too. And then one of the Russians wanted to rape my mother and she just said "Liebe Gott sieht, Liebe Gott sieht", "God will see you". And her face, I can always remember that, on the one hand it felt like a mother's face talking to a boy. I was barely old enough to understand what was going on. I didn't know about rape or anything, but I knew this was bad. But then he couldn't do it, he left her. He understood what she was saying, she spoke in simple German.

Then we heard some noises behind us and it was some other people coming, they had a little hand wagon and you could hear them talking and the wheels of the wagon were squeaking. There were four Russians and three of them left to go to the other group and they left one with us, with a gun, and then we heard the other people at the back screaming for help, and it was terrible, and then this soldier also left us and walked towards the screaming. We all stood there, frozen, because he had told us we had to stay there, but mother said, "come, we must go now", and then we ran. There was supposed to be a little bridge over the river which we didn't find so my mother waded through the river and she had me on her shoulders but the water only went to her waist.

So then we were over the border in the newly created West Germany. We had a little blanket and it was night, it was May or June but it was cold and we just sat there on the blanket. And then an American came and my mother could speak a bit of English and he told us we must go into the barn, where they keep fodder for the cows. There were lots of other people already there and it was nice and warm. One man wanted to light a cigarette, and then everybody said "how can you light a cigarette, its a barn here!"

The next day we went further and I was frightened the whole time, like a paranoia. I was not very frightened during the border crossing, but the next day I felt the Russians were coming, they are at my neck. In a little village they had a water pump where people could draw water and where people stood around and told all kinds of terrible stories, how the Russians with their big boots kicked them in the stomach. I just felt so frightened, it was terrible, it feels as

though it is in your neck somehow. I wanted to get away as far and quickly as possible. The railways and everything didn't work as before, so the Americans asked the people, do you want to go North or South and they divided the people into groups. American trucks transported people further in the directions they wanted to go. Some trains worked so sometimes we had a train and got a bit further. It took about two weeks to get back to Dusseldorf which normally takes a day and a half.

My mother left me at my Tante Ellie in Essen, that's my father's sister, she had four children. My mother left me there and went back across the border to get Willie and Helmut. The second time she went over they somehow lost my brother Helmut, but they found him again. They went through another route, it was also a forest and it was dark and he got lost somehow. On her second trip across the border her sisters went with her, Tante Maria and Tante Hilde. Then she went back a third time to get her sewing machine, as she was facing an uncertain future with no husband. So she went over three times over, she was very courageous, I think I would never do it.

## **After the war**

We struggled after the war. When we came back from Triebes the government took our Demag flat because my father was dead and my mother was just a widow. The flat went to a higher ranked person. Our furniture was in four corners of the city. During the war the government paid the widows well, but that stopped after the war. My mother was looking for a place to stay, and we lived with family. Then my mother found a very old house near the factory. I was always a bit ashamed of that place, as the toilet was old and at the end of outside steps. Behind the house there was loose rubble from a bombed house and it was years before that was taken away. In any case, it was all my mother could afford as the rent was reasonable. It is difficult to explain what it was like after the war, all the houses were bombed and there were refugees coming in from East Germany, so we were glad we had a place to stay.

At first there was not much food. My mother and her sister made some handbags to sell. My mother went on regular day-long expeditions to the farms and this was how she got some syrup and food from 1945 to 1948. The trains were overfull because a lot of people were going to farms to get food. We were always hungry. My mother was a supportive and nurturing woman for her family. I don't think my mother was a good cook, but she could make very nice vegetable soup.

When we went back to Dusseldorf my mother said she couldn't keep me at school because she did not have money. So she said I have to go to the Volks-schule, and I cried for a long time as Volks-schule only went to intermediary level. It was not an academic school, but I had to have some education. So I chose to be a "Drogistin" (pharmacy assistant).

## **Childhood and teenage years**

I felt that I had a lot of illnesses as a child. I had diphtheria and scarlet fever and I had pneumonia as a young baby and so on. I had some problem with my kidneys when I was 14, but since then I have been healthy.

When I contracted diphtheria, I was taken to hospital by ambulance with wailing sirens, but I

wasn't frightened. Diphtheria was considered like an epidemic, and patients had to be confined. My father was still alive and my mother and father came and stood behind glass looking into the hospital ward. I must have been four or five. The sisters in the hospital were very friendly. I contracted scarlet fever, when I was about seven or eight, before we went to Thüringen. I felt terrible, I had a fever and my father was dead.

When I was a teenager after the war we couldn't afford good clothes but I was very keen on having nice clothes. My mother made my clothes – the clothes she made was actually well made, but as a teenager I always wanted the latest fashions. I fell in love a number of times but I also fell out of love quickly. At the pharmacy school there was a fellow student that I became infatuated with. His father had a pharmacy. I always wanted him to notice me but he didn't take so much notice of me. We went on a school outing to a wine cellar tour – and he was also on the bus. And when everybody had some wine, I said that I am in love with this guy and a girl said you shouldn't be in love because he already has a girlfriend. And I remember I went to films starring Alan Ladd<sup>1</sup> – and I saw the film three times because I become star-struck and I thought - "I'm going to America".

My mother could never tell me about sex. I asked her later, why didn't she tell me about sexual education and she just said that she was too ashamed to tell me. My cousin Ellen was one of Tante Ellies daughters, we played quite a lot together while the group of us were in Thüringen and the whole family would go on walks together. We had our fantasy plays and we had fantasy boyfriends. She was 2 years older than me. After the war I stayed at their place in Essen for a few months while my mother went to fetch Willie and Helmut and organized a flat.

I just remember that Ellen told me how it works, that a little seed is planted inside you. And at that stage I was very interested in flowers, I loved flowers, and I remember this little seed as a little flower seed. When someone talked to Ellen about the physical sex act she said "No my parents don't do that!"



*Gretel and Ellen Krauel*

We sometimes went out in the evening, not that we really went anywhere as we couldn't go into restaurants or anything. My mother was very cross if we came home late. She was very occupied with her sewing and she worked from home. Later she had the first operation of her cancer. We didn't talk that much, because I also came home around seven or eight from work. When people made comments about my large eyes and long eyelashes my mother told them they mustn't do that because I will become vain. This caused me to think about my eyes, but I came to realize that other people also have beautiful features. At first you may think you are special and then later on you realize you are just another human.

---

1



I wasn't interested in cosmetics at first – I had an aunt who was very glamorous and used lipstick. No one in my family used lipstick, except my Tante Gertie - she was blond, had pronounced eyes and lipstick and wore high heel shoes, so she was the glamor girl of the family. She had lots of little bottles around. I got more interested in cosmetics from the ages of about 18 to 20. And of course the Drogerie sold cosmetics too. Smoking was normal in those days, and I started smoking when I was 18 years old.

## Starting work

As a “Drogistin” I learned about basic pharmacy like botany and chemicals and photography. The course ran from eight until four two days a week, and the rest of the week I worked in the Drogerie from 8am to 7pm. Drogerie shops do not exist in Germany anymore. Drogeries provided natural remedies and you had to know how to mix ingredients to make certain acids. In three years you learn the trade.

I looked for a job in the main city in Dusseldorf, because I wanted to be in the city center. At first I got a job in the Rosen Drogerie where the manager had a hole in his temple - it was probably from the war. The manager's wife was very pale.

Sometimes when the manager got upset his hole bulged out. One lunchtime the Drogerie was closed and the assistant groped me, but I managed to break away. After that I felt I could not work there, it felt too terrible for me. I went out at lunchtime and just couldn't go back. I thought I had a duty not to leave as we needed the money and I had to contribute to the household. I walked and walked until I went over the bridge. I decided I was going to my uncle, my mother's brother, in Wiesbaden. He created advertisements for wine and other products. I didn't have any money but I had a tram card. A car gave me a lift. He asked me what was wrong, and if I said I just want to get away. The driver told me I should go home. When I went back over the bridge I didn't know how to go further from there. So I walked back and sat down on a bench and and I wrote down how how I felt in a little book. Then I went home and when my mother read what I wrote the next morning she said I don't have to go back to that job. That surprised me, as I thought it was my duty to keep working. My mother had a very strong sense of duty. My mother phoned them and said I wont be coming back and that I was resigning. Then I found another job on a very fashionable street in Dusseldorf, Konigallee, selling make up and all kinds of other things. Film stars and theater people came to the fashionable Drogerie. I remember the manager at the Konigallee Drogerie – Mr Niggemeyer and his wife – they were quite nice. Work hours were also 8.30am until 7pm, but it was a longer travel time home. We had an hour for lunch. At that stage it was standard that people would work long hours in the shops. Everything was open until 7pm, on Saturday's too. The only day you had free was Sundays.

My uncle Alfred lived nearby and the family visited each other. Tante Ellie had an elder



*Me and a few friends from the Drogistin class*

daughter Gretel, I think Ellen was two years younger than Gretel. Ellie sometimes took care of two boys who lost their mother. So Tante Ellie sometimes made them meals, while their father was studying architecture. Ellen became interested in one of the boys and he was supposed to be her boyfriend. Then later on, Gretel, her sister and Ellen were at a party, and this guy was also there, and she noticed that he was flirting with Gretel. So in the end the young man married Gretel. And Ellen moved to Frankfurt and married somebody else. Ellen's husband later died of prostate cancer.

## Courtship with Willem

I was 20 when I met Willem. I met Willem through my uncle Alfred, my mother's brother, who was working for Demag, helping to teach apprentices. Willem studied Mechanical Engineering in South Africa and joined an Engineering exchange with Demag after obtaining his degree. Willem also struck up a bit of a friendship with uncle Alfred and he came to uncle Alfred's house one day. Uncle Alfred talked about this South African Engineer before and I didn't take much notice of it because there was such a lot going on around my Mother's illness. I went to uncle Alfred in the evening after work and there was Willem and they said this is Herr van der Merwe, Fräulein Steintjes, and we greeted by hand. I had this sudden thought that this is the man I am going to marry. When I thought this is the man I am going to marry, I was not in love with him. Afterwards I pushed the thought from my mind.



*Tante Kathe, Onkel Alfred and me*

Willem later told me he thought I was such an attractive girl, that I wouldn't be interested in him. I thought Willem looked like an aristocrat, as he had a pipe and wore tweed jackets. Willem could converse in German quite well at that stage. He expressed himself in a worldly manner.

Willem was different. Uncle Pauli said Willem may behave differently in his own country. In Germany I knew how things worked and I had my family. Willem probably felt more like a stranger and behaved well in a foreign environment. After the first meeting we made a date again. We went to a pub and drank a bit of wine, smoked and talked. It was easy to talk to Willem and slowly I fell in love with him. I don't know which evening, but we danced a bit also. Then he took me home but we didn't make any new dates or anything.



Willem and I walked a lot and we went eating out and he came our family flat, and we went to uncle Alfred and his wife and once when it was snowing he got a car from somewhere and we went out into the country in the snow. Willem's friend, Rocco du Plessis, was also there, so we went out with Rocco. Rocco was flamboyant man who was two meters tall. He later married a beautiful glamorous woman (Elsebie) with whom he had passionate arguments and fallouts. He bought an old ship, and lost a lot of money on it. He flew planes, and died while flying an airplane, leaving his wife and sons bereft in South Africa.

I knew Willem for a year before we got engaged, but I didn't really understand him. Helmut and Willie told me Willem went to see a film, with some blood in the film and Willem fainted. My brothers were against us getting married. When my mother died I didn't want to see him really. He went to Spain on holiday and when he came back he was more persistent and we met up again. At one stage, when my mother died, I decided - "I don't want to see him again", but later I contacted him again. So we did not have a stable relationship.



*My brothers Willi and Helmut*

## **Mother's death**

My mother thought my relationship with Willem was serious. When she was already very ill, she said to my cousin that if it came to that she would tell me to wait for a year, and if I wanted to move to South Africa then, she would give me her consent. But when she was dying, she had morphine for the pain, she once opened her eyes and very clearly said to me, "Dont go to Africa, don't go to Africa". I was kind of shaken and I went out and I saw Willem on the street and I didn't want to talk to him, I just went past him. I cried and cried – my mother was dying and I felt all alone in the world.

Lots of people and the whole family came around my mother's death bed. Willem also came and she said to him "Hello Willem" and that made an impression on him, that she still recognised him.

My mother died in 1955, I was 21 when my mother died. Ellen visited and told me the story about how Ellens boyfriend married Gretel when my mother died. Ellen came with me to visit my mother in the funeral home. My dead mother looked so different that I felt she was alien to me, and I just ran out. Ellen was with me and she comforted me. But I lost contact with her after I went to SA. Somehow I retained more contact with Gretel and with Doris but not with Ellen. Ellen was beautiful.

## **Journey to South Africa**

In the end I rationalised my relationship with Willem. Willem wrote me a letter and said he dreamed about me and would I consider going to South Africa? He said, "lets get engaged in Germany and you can come to South Africa for three months and see if you adjust or not. If you cannot you can go back. If it works you then you can stay."



I accepted and went to South Africa in 1956. We went on a ship called the Lloyd Tristene.

There was entertainment on board every day – games or dances. And we made friends, talked with other people there. I was in a cabin with a Greek woman and he was in another one. Because at that stage it was like that. Willem got angry when another man asked me to dance and I accepted. It took ten or twelve days to get to South Africa. We departed from Venice and landed in Vendusi (Italy), then Port Said (Egypt), then Mogadishu, Mombasa. Little boats came to the big boat and wanted to sell goods. It got steadily worse and I got worried. So when I saw the Durban skyline (wolke krabbes) I thought ok, its not that primitive.



*In Venice on our way to South Africa*

### Willem's family

His parents came and fetched us from Durban in a very old Chevy car that smelled of dust and of Africa. And we immediately set off for Kroonstad, where his parents lived and I still remember this dusty road and a sky so high and so clear, much higher than Germany. I stayed for two weeks or so with Willem and then he got work in Johannesburg and I stayed with his parents for six weeks or so. It was constricting. I liked his mother but they were very Calvinistic, with “huisgodsdienst” every evening – they had this religious service in the home and everything was regimented. Willem's mother could speak German, so I spoke German with her. Later she said she would speak Afrikaans and I can still speak German but I have to learn Afrikaans. His mother was a teacher, and in later life she also started to learn Zulu. She was an intellectual woman, very interested in everything, politics and so on. She also said you cant live without religion, that would be terrible for her to live without religion. She wasn't like her husband for whom religion seemed formalistic.



My father-in-law (Willem's father) went to America in his youth and did a motor car trade at the Sweeney automobile school and became a foreman at Ford. He and a friend set up a garage, but the friend sold the garage to him without notifying him that the lease on their

building had expired. He packed all his tools up and came back to South Africa to marry the woman he met on a train as he was traveling to America. Together they got a bit of money together and set up a garage in Bethlehem. My father-in-law later established another garage in East London. The family was Afrikaans and had a strong dislike for the British because Willem's ancestors suffered under atrocities during the British Boer War. Lots of Afrikaners died in British Concentration camps, and the British troops burnt down Boer farms. The story goes that a child (great-uncle) had to beg British soldiers for a horse-head for food after the British destroyed the farm.

My mother in Law had a maid in the house and somebody that worked in the garden a few days a week. In the afternoon she played the piano. They sometimes went to the town (dorp). My mother in law took me swimming – there was a high school swimming team and they were all diving into the water, but I never did. Eventually I took my courage and dived but landed on my stomach. Not a huge success.

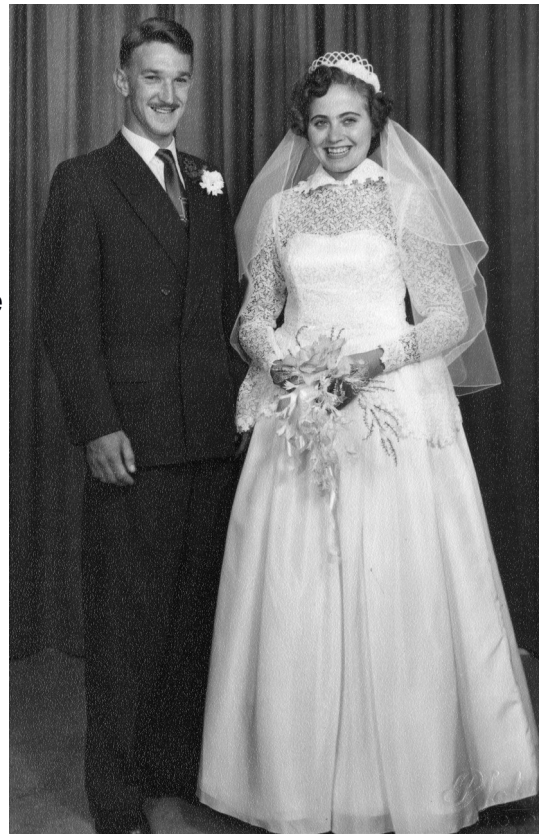
My mother in Law had some Dutch neighbors and we went there for tea. In those days she did her shopping on the telephone – she ordered it and it was delivered to the house. And on Friday nights we went to see a film – it was organised on a weekly schedule.

At the end of that period I went to Willem's sister in Sasolburg and later on to Lucia and Hein in Johannesburg and that was nice. I enjoyed that, there were children and it was lively.

## Marriage

We were married in March – after three months. I grew up Catholic and when Willem's parents took me to the Dutch Reform church. I had no family at the wedding. The church felt bare and I felt kind of alienated. I missed the rituals and customs from Germany. We got married in the church and had a meal in the hotel restaurant, and all his family were there – quite old family – his mother and father, and Lucia, they were the younger ones, and Jean his sister. The next day we went to a hotel near Hartebeespoortdam had a three day honeymoon. I learned to speak Afrikaans in three months after I really put my heart into it. Lucia spoke very distinctly and that helped. We lived near Lucia in Linden.

First we stayed in a boarding house in Hillbrow, in one room, then later in a flat in Linden near Lucia. I worked at Volkskas bank where I did administrative work. Volkskas had these old mechanical counting machines. It was quite interesting, and I got to know other people. I lost my favorite coat there – one day it disappeared from the coat racks.



I started expecting Lilette after three or four months of marriage. Later Willem got some money from his parents and we had a house built in Ferndale. The house in Ferndale was a



model or spec home, on more than an acre of ground in the north of Johannesburg. The house was a split level with three bedrooms and a bathroom and a little terrace. It was in a L form – so if you came in there was an entrance hall, then a dining room, then three steps down and a lounge followed by a kitchen, then the bedrooms. We did not do much to the garden.

One Easter Willem and Chris Aderndorf and his wife wanted to go to the Kruger Park and I felt I couldn't ask for the time off because I had just started working at the bank. So Willem went to the Volkskas manager and asked if I could have the time off – and they gave me the time off and we went to the Kruger Park. I just started driving and Willem suggested it is a good place to drive. He changed his mind after I almost drove over a buck. Everybody raves about the Kruger Park, but I didn't enjoy sitting in the car the whole day. Afterwards people told me one should go out early in the morning to the water holes to view the game and then go back to the camp, have something to drink and braaivleis.

After three years Willem said he is not going to work at Demag anymore, as he saw upcoming problems. Willem got a job at the Yskor steel works and first he thought that he would be in Pretoria, but then got a job at Vanderbijlpark and we were there for seven years. We just rented. Our second house was in Waterkloofrif in Pretoria.

## Motherhood

Lilette was born when we lived in the flat. Kris was born when we lived in a house. With Lilette I worked six or seven months into the pregnancy

When Lilette was born my water broke before I had any contractions. They gave me an epidural and then the contractions came on strongly – and she was a good nice healthy baby. The main problem that I had while in hospital was that she didn't want to drink. I was ten days in hospital which is unheard of now. When we went home she was ok, slept well, but later on she cried more and we didn't know what it was, so we went to after care and they said that she has lost weight, probably doesn't get enough food and that I should give her the bottle. So from then on she got the bottle and I always gave the bottle when she cried.

Lucia lived about ten minutes away and sometimes she looked after our children. Lucia gave advice as she already had three children, Kobus, Hannes and Frieda, one year apart from each other. There was this book by Dr Spock at the time which I never read. I breast fed Kris and Gretel for three or four months. Their births were less painful.





When Kris was seven months old we moved to Vanderbijlpark. He had constipation quite often – I had to put suppositories in his bottom. Similar to me, Kris had lots of infections especially with his tonsils. The doctor said it wouldn't be good to take them out as it would affect his sexual development. Gretel also had constipation, and Gretel had her tonsils out when she was four. Lilette was very chuffed with Gretel, as it was like a doll for her. She wanted to be a teacher to Gretel. We had planned to have Gretel. We wanted two children, then a gap and two more. We tried for another child after Gretel, and then I had a miscarriage and I never wanted to try again after that. It was very traumatic for me. It happened at home in Vanderbijlpark – I remember being in the bed and it was full of blood. I had to ask the maid to get the neighbour to phone Willem or somebody for help and afterwards the doctor came. I was depressed for some time after that.

It was nice to see my children develop and they were so cute – these little people running around and doing things. It is different with my grandson, Liam because you don't have all this baggage you have with your own children that you want them to be this or that.

In Vanderbijlpark I did a lot of reading and gardening. I was dormant in a way. When Lilette was born I regretted that I couldn't show her to my family and my mother and so on. I had little confidence, as Willem did all the organizing as he knew how everything worked. I went to a psychiatrist and he said I am depressed. We had Dutch neighbours in Vanderbijlpark, Agnes and Willem flirted with each other and I was jealous. I shouldn't have been but it depressed me. Now when I see pictures I can't understand why I was so jealous. I had a friend with whom I shared a pregnancy during my pregnancy with Gretel, but it was not an ongoing friendship. We sometimes met with Rocco and Elsebie. Elsebie was studying through the Unisa correspondence University.



When we moved to Pretoria I did some dressmaking lessons. I also worked as an estate agent but I stopped doing that after I sold two houses. I imported some slimming machines and sold them. Then I got started into the garden. In Pretoria I designed the garden and read lots of books about it and occupied my mind with it. I developed an interest in some of the philosophy classics such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Carl Jung. I gravitated to reading Jung as I liked on his ideas on self-actualization. Just like plants, humans need the right conditions for growth.

I also started studying through Unisa to gain university entrance (Matric). We normally had something going on on Friday or Saturday evening and we often had a cosmopolitan crowd. Rocco and Elsebie sometimes drove through from Rustenburg. We always had pets as Willem and the children were keen on the pets. Kris looked after the dogs as we bought the dogs to keep him company.

We went to the Cape, Durban and to the Drakensberg on summer holidays. One day we came back from Cape Town and there was this newspaper with big headlines "Kennedy Shot" and Willem said, that is just like newspapers when a Kennedy family member is shot they make a big headline. When we came to his parents in Kroonstad, they said "Its Kennedy, the president who was shot". Willem's family were National party and apartheid supporters. I never could vote, I still have a German passport and never voted. We became progressively more liberal over time. My father in law once got angry during a discussion and he said, "why don't you go home!" Willem said you speak to my wife here. Willem's brother Hein had some contact with the editor of a newspaper who was more liberal and they had group discussions. And once Willem voted progressive party as a protest vote. Kris later became active in the anti-apartheid movement when he was studying Engineering

## **Willem's background**

Willem was born with his one twisted arm so that his palm naturally faced upwards. He had an operation to correct this when he was 12 or 13. Willem also had eczema for a long time. He had it from birth. He was born in Bethlehem in SA and then they moved to East London. They gave him donkey milk as that was the only milk he could drink without side effects.

Willem skipped a class in primary school (std 3 to 5), he was younger and more skinny than the other children in high school. He didn't feel comfortable in the higher class because he felt physically disadvantaged. So he was quite intelligent but eventually he went back to the class where he actually belonged. He won long distance running races, and broke a 1500 meter school record at 16 and 17. His mother was very musical and he went to lessons but he didn't like classical music, so he taught himself syncopation on the piano. He also played the accordion, and was a member of a band at some stage. As a young man or teenager Willem was in love with a girl. When I met him he mentioned he how he often jogged to her house. She never commit herself to him. One day his mother said she would give him money to buy an engagement ring, but he also didn't want to do that. It seemed to me that the course of that relationship had a formative effect on Willem.

Willem always wanted to be a doctor but his mother put him off it. The family knew a very fat woman in East London and she said that if he were a doctor he would have to look at the piles of this woman and that put him off completely. So Willem didn't want to study at first and then his father said he could work in the garage. The people in the garage didn't treat him

like the boss's son, and so he thought that if he didn't have an education he would have to work under people like that and that was not very appealing to him so he decided to study. Willem studied mechanical engineering at the Wits University. He says he didn't study very hard.

He worked at the railway in Johannesburg as an engineer after his studies and wasn't that happy there, because it wasn't real work. Then he saw this advertisement of Demag in the newspaper – they were looking for young engineers to come to Germany to get to know the factories and at the same time they would pay a salary. I think the motive behind that was that the engineers would later build a relationship with Demag and become familiar with Demag products. So he got it and he went to Germany. Started in Duisburg – couldn't speak a word of German. But there was a bar there that English soldiers went to, and he could speak a bit of English. I met him after he was there a year. When he came back to SA he worked for Demag for about 3 years, then he went to ISCOR. Willem did his MBA while he was at ISCOR – at the University of Pretoria. Then ISCOR transferred him as a construction manager to Newcastle. He didn't want to go to Newcastle so he resigned. Eventually he got this Littleton Engineering job in the weapons industry. Willem started drinking in Pretoria, when he started at Littleton Engineering it started to get more heavy. At Littleton Engineering, he became second in command but that got too much for him later on, so he applied for the lecture post in Cape Town, so we moved to Cape Town.

## Divorce

Willem said he felt more comfortable when drinks and has more self-esteem and can communicate better with people. The drinking impacted negatively on his relationships later on.

Willem did not believe in a God. His brother Hein was very Christian and he spoke of Albert Schweitzer and his reverence for life and I went out of the door and looked out at the sky and was impressed with its majesty and then Willem came out and said – lightning will not hit you if you don't believe. But later on in life Willem prayed when he went through difficult stretches. I don't know whether he thought there was maybe a God or whether he didn't know what else to do.

In Pretoria I studied towards a librarian through Unisa as I had gained University entrance while we were in Pretoria. I chose subjects in library science as I was a book-lover. Around the time we moved to Cape Town.

Willem's drinking was an issue in marriage. Willem felt that I didn't do what he expected of a woman. I could never actually define what Willem expected but he expected me to surrender to him. I just couldn't do that completely. Willem yearned for something perfect, for the perfect woman, a romantic or sentimental ideal. When Willem drank he listened to emotive operatic music.

There was one very bad night when he got very physical. And I went to Hannes (Hein's son) in the night. Hannes knew of a Dominee and this Dominee knew of a psychologist so I went to the psychologist. I still had the hope that things could go well if reason could prevail. So we went to this Mr Bauermeyer and told him the story and then he wanted to see us separately and we saw him separately and later on Mr Bauermeyer advised me to divorce.



He said he cannot help in our case, and that it was difficult to describe what was precisely wrong in our marriage. So I went to the attorney. Mr Bauermeyster advised me to do that.

That was Gretel's last year at school. Kris was there and he said I should divorce, and I went to Lucia. Things were too terrible at home. And when I came back I slept in a hotel. But I didn't know how I was going to make a living, because I didn't have any money. And one night Willem came to the hotel and he said lets go through with the divorce and then you can try for a year to get a job and we can see how it works out. So I did that. But it didn't work out.

Around that time I met Robin Ayrdon through the philosophy. She was working on a recipe book for Pick and Pay. I worked with Robin on the recipe book. I was not really paid (I received 20 cents per hour). For each recipe I did an initial trial cooking so we could evaluate whether to include them in the recipe book. We also included a few of my recipes in the book. I took some of the experiments home for supper. One of the meat dishes had coffee in it and Willem found that surprising and upsetting.

Our marriage was a failed opportunity. It is possible that it may have worked out differently, but you cant have regrets after 20 or 30 years.

After the divorce for seven or eight years (until Willem met Irene) there was this emotional see saw the whole time – a feeling that we hadn't completely broken up.

## **School of philosophy**

I saw an advert on the roots of philosophy (London School of Economics), back in the mid 1970s. At the time I thought it was interesting, but I couldn't go, as it was in Johannesburg and we were in Pretoria. Then when we moved to Cape Town and in 1978 I saw the advert again, and Willem also said phone them and find out what it is about. So I phoned and I told him, but he didn't want to go. So I went on my own to a ladies morning group, and later I went in the evenings. The philosophy framework suited me better than the Catholic church. Though I would go to the Catholic church now if I didn't have the philosophy school. Over time the School of Economics became like a church to me as it was a place where I could reflect with a like minded community.

## **Car accident**

When Kris and Aletta were still married –we went to Kris's house in Somerset West and Willem started drinking and started shouting and arguing, I went outside and didn't want to be part of it- were already seven years divorced. Willem still shouted in the car on the way back. He drove very fast with the BMW in right hand lane of freeway when a taxi turned into the lane in front of us. I could see it, and there was time to stop, but Willem drove into it. He drove very fast with BMW. I had a back injury and broken collarbone. It was in hospital for quite a while and can still feel the old injuries. Willem only had a cut above his nose. When I got out of hospital I met Irene at Willem's house and then I went back to my flat and thought “thats it”, “never again” - I am never going back.

The courts prosecuted the taxi driver but not Willem. The insurance said it was because the taxi driver came across the center divide of the highway. The taxi didn't have passengers. The BMW was totally wrecked.

## Starting to work again

Although I did not complete the librarian degree, the subjects that I did complete gained me a job at the Cape Technicon library. I also bought a flat.

In the beginning I typed up catalogue cards and packed books back into the shelves, and generally helped out. I enjoyed interaction with the Lecturers when they wanted books in their subject areas. I gradually became responsible for book procurement. And I got paid a bit more.

## Books in Print

I used English and American Books in print to locate books at the Polytechnic. There was no South African Books in Print. This was before Google and Amazon. Kris kept encouraging me to start a South African Books in Print. I remember discussing it during a walk along the Table Mountain pipe line track. I guess it was then that I made up my mind to do it, and it was a good time as I was living on my own.

Kris started writing the software for Books in Print. At that time software was still terminal (text) based. Kris and I went to see some of the larger publishers to get some support for the project. They were trying to discourage us by saying we would fail. One of the publishers stated that they were going to create the South African Books in Print. They never did. Kris was adamant we should continue.

I started sending hundreds of snailmail requests for the catalogs of active books from each publisher. In the letters I specified the information we needed. Some publishers did not respond.. Where the publishers did not respond I reconstructed their catalogs from other sources. Many publishers just sent their existing pamphlets, and some publishers sent electronic copies. We imported electronic data where we could. There was a lot of refining of processes and systems in the first two years.

This was my time of hard work. I was working at the Polytechnic during the day, setting up Books in Print at night and during the weekends, attending Philosophy, and running the household (flathold!) . After a few years it started to pay off, and all the publishers became cooperative as I had since become the official South African Books in Print. The SA books in print book was quite thick and cost more than a normal book. I produced a printed copy and a Microfiche copy. Sometimes demand caused me to do a reprint.

I now had a new life, quite different from my marriage life. It was hard, but less stressful. Over time I became known in the SA publishing industry. Librarians that interacted with the Polytechnic library knew about me and Books in Print. At one stage my Manager at the Polytechnic insisted I hand Books in Print over to the Polytechnic but I resisted this. The director from the Berlin state library visited the South African state library and asked whether a South African Books in Print existed. He was referred to me and came to visit me in my very modest office space. He then suggested that I attend the publishers conference in Pretoria and give a talk on ISBN numbering. I was very nervous about the talk. Kris helped me create the slides and I practiced the talk. Lilette drove me to the conference. I lost my nervousness when I gave the talk. The audience asked me some questions after the talk.

When Kris moved to New Zealand, I became worried about the maintenance of the software,

but the software continued working well and Kris even made an adjustments for a new printer from New Zealand. But the whole book market was changing. It was becoming common to find books directly from places like Amazon, and the "Books in Print" role was slowly becoming redundant. I sold the South African Books in Print to Whitakers in London in 1999, which was timely, as it freed me from having to stay in Cape Town.

I produced the South African Books in Print for seven years.

Gretel was working in Berlin in her research field so I went to visit her. Then I wanted to travel more and I visited Egypt (Cairo) with Lilette. The Books in Print money came in handy for traveling.

I went for my first New Zealand visit in 2004. We always went on trips when I visited New Zealand. On my first trip we went around some of the remote areas in New Zealand. After a while i thought there weren't really any people in New Zealand.

Willem died in 2004, the same year Gretel's son Liam was born.

I got a sales job on the Cape waterfront selling carpets. I got the job because the owner of Hilllmond weavers was looking for a salesperson that could speak German.

The area where my flats was located became worse over time. A lot of drunks started hanging round in the area. I once started picking up all the garbage and a colored woman came to help me. I sold my flat in 2010.

## **Staying with Gretel**

I cooked, did the ironed the washing and vacuumed the house. I took Liam to school and started the garden.