

Chapter 7

The Japanese established headquarters all over town. Our home was no longer ours. It was theirs. The local school would become our home away from home, but before going there we had to register at the police station.

At the station we joined other Dutch companions in distress. My father looked around and expressed surprise at the number of former Dutch government officials who were in the same situation.

I quickly observed that our family was the only one with children. A few single men were in the group, along with some older couples and one single woman—my teacher, Miss Seau.

When my mother saw Miss Seau, she immediately walked up to her and pulled her aside in private conversation. Miss Seau knew that I was a girl! She was the one who encouraged me to play the accordion on Saturdays at singing class. She led the students in song while I accompanied them on my accordion.

Just as the two women began to speak in low tones, heads bowed, my father approached to inform my mother

that he was being called in for the “registration.” I watched the two women from a short distance away. An expression of surprise came on Miss Seau’s face; then she walked away from my mother and in my direction.

“Hello, Miss Seau. Mom told you?”

She returned my greeting with a smile and a rather reserved, “Hello! You’re looking good! The change is very becoming.”

Something in the way she looked at me made me uneasy, so I asked her, “Is anything wrong?” She moved closer to me and whispered, “Your mother told me everything except . . .” She paused for a moment, looking around to assure privacy.

“Except what, Miss Seau?”

“Except . . . what do I call you, Rita? What is your new name?”

Her question caught me totally off guard. We had forgotten to give me a new name! Rita wouldn’t do anymore. I needed a boy’s name. In our excitement, none of us had thought of it!

“Shhh! Excuse me, Miss Seau!” I said in panic. “Please don’t talk to anybody about me until I return.” I fearfully looked around, afraid that someone might have overheard her call me by my real name.

When I whispered our oversight to my mother, she turned pale.

“Dear Lord, how could we have overlooked something so important?” She became frantic, realizing that my father was not there to discuss the matter. Tante Suus, noticing the commotion, came closer to see what was wrong. The two whispered and now it was my aunt’s turn to be shocked.

At the same time, my father emerged from the office. When he approached them, Tante Suus sighed with relief and left my parents to talk.

From a distance, it was as if I was viewing a silent movie with the actors involved in a squabble. Then my father gently took my mother's arm and led her toward us. He seemed very much in control, relaxed, and confident, unlike my mother. As they reached us, my father said to me with a big grin on his face, "Hi, Rick!"

"Is that my new name, Pop?" I whispered.

"Yes! From now on your name is Richard. You may be called Rick." When I heard that, it was as if the little girl named Rita with beautiful long brown hair no longer existed. I felt that this new creation by the name of Rick, with the boy's haircut and dressed in boys' clothing, had completely taken over her life.

My father then gathered us around him for a talk. He told my brothers that they had to forget they had a sister. "You now have a brother, and his name is Rick." René, who was much too young to really understand what was going on, took it all in stride. Ronald, on the other hand, seemed annoyed.

"I was very lucky that the clerk did not do any cross-checking, especially on Rita's birth certificate," my father continued, addressing my mother and aunt. "I would not have known how to get out from under it if he had. It would have been disastrous, but . . . all is well. Thank goodness!"

I returned to Miss Seau to give her the news about my name. When I rejoined my family, Father Koevoets was there. He gave me two thumbs up and a wink as if to say, "Keep up the good work!"

Registration for all prisoners was completed that afternoon. We were ordered to gather up our belongings, line up, and march to the school across the street. Walking through the gate with the group reminded me of cattle being driven into a corral, just like in a western movie. On one side of the school yard, we rested on the grass in the cool shade of the trees. Japanese guards flanked the area, keeping a sharp eye on us.

Moments later, food was distributed. We had no idea where it came from or who had prepared it. During the meal, we tossed about many questions regarding our situation, but none of us knew the answers. One of the most crucial questions—“Will we stay together or be segregated?”—was left unanswered. Dread overcame us all.

I remembered what my father had said earlier, about how the enemy would have better control over its prisoners if they were all concentrated in one place. It was true, and it was happening now. There was no doubt in my mind that he had been right.

After lunch, the sharp sounds of slamming car doors cut through the already tense atmosphere. Voices at the front gate spoke what sounded like an order in Japanese, directed at us. Although none of us understood what was said, each of us instinctively jumped.

There he was again! The same officer, the shopkeeper, who had come to our home that morning. He carried his sword in one hand as he walked toward the podium set up for the occasion, which was no more than a pallet. His slow, careful march was a deliberate effort to impress us with his authority. He looked over the group and with a beckoning hand gesture invited everyone to come closer.

Before he had a chance to begin, voices in the crowd yelled out, “How long will we be here?” “Why are we here?” “What are you going to do with us?”

The officer held up a hand to restore order. He grinned, looked over the crowd, bowed deeply, and totally ignored the questions. “Did you enjoy your lunch?” he asked. Retorts flew from the audience. “You call that lunch! It was fine, but not enough! When is the next mealtime?”

“Yes! When is our next meal? We are all quite hungry!” other voices echoed.

“Answer our questions, damn it!”

Once again, he ignored the remarks, and standing erect and confident, he began his speech. First he introduced himself. “I am Captain Matoba. Many among you know me as the storekeeper in town. Some of you have been in my store. Because of that and my ability to speak your language fluently, my superiors appointed me to this post. As long as you do what is expected of you, we won’t have any problems getting along with each other.”

A deathly hush fell. Except for the sound of someone sobbing behind me, there was total, eerie silence. I moved closer to my father and placed my hand in his. Staring straight ahead and seemingly unemotional, he, in return, squeezed my hand tenderly.

Captain Matoba was officially the commandant of the Djambi prisoner-of-war camp. He instructed us in the procedures of bowing to our superiors and the importance of showing respect to all military personnel. He demonstrated a proper bow and instructed us to participate in the practice. “I expect all of you to respect and obey all orders,” he shouted.

“How long are you going to keep us here?” demanded a man in the group.

“Please do not interrupt!” the captain fired back. “You will have an opportunity to ask questions after I have said what I came to say. Thank you!”

Silence returned. He spoke of the camp’s rules and its guard roster. He described all the important buildings surrounding the school, such as the military and police headquarters. “I am telling you this so you won’t try anything stupid to get yourself in trouble or attempt to escape.” General groans of disapproval went up from the crowd, but no one spoke words of discontent. Matoba had gotten across his message of intimidation.

After a short pause, he invited the women to gather in front of the school. Worried looks passed between the men and women. The dismantling of family—the critical structure of our lives—was about to take place.

With one hand on his sword, the captain strode from the school playground. The women followed. In front of the building, he turned around and faced them for the first time in his capacity as commandant of this camp.

At this point, Mrs. de Vries, the mayor’s wife and oldest female, was instructed to divide the women into three groups, assign them to the three available classrooms, and elect room captains. They were then allowed to enter their assigned rooms and told, “Pick a spot, deposit your luggage, then join the men outside.”

The room where my mother, aunt, brothers and I would stay had mattresses lined up against the walls and piles of pillows nearby, all of which had been confiscated

from our homes earlier that day. My brothers and I were the only children in the whole group of about fifty.

Meanwhile, outside, the men awaiting their families' return were in a state of despair.

The captain, in conference with his staff a few steps away, returned to the podium. Without further delay, he announced, "You may not want to hear this, but the men will be going to the jailhouse."

The women wept uncontrollably, grabbing their husbands for comfort. One woman fainted.

Suddenly, above all the weeping, the grief-stricken voice of a woman wailed, "Why didn't you tell us upfront that you planned to take our husbands away from us? Why couldn't you have been honest with us? We don't deserve this kind of treatment!" She spoke with such passion, such heartbreak that all began to weep anew.

But another woman responded, crying, "Because they are bloody cowards. They came to our homes to make sure that we would all show, so that they can lock us up and do whatever they please with us, including separate us from our husbands. From the very beginning they knew what they were going to do with us." She walked up to the captain, lunged at him, and whacked him with the sack that held her belongings. "Oh, you contemptible louse!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Two guards ran to Captain Matoba's rescue and pulled the woman away. Fighting them, she shouted all kinds of obscenities and clawed at the empty air. A man, probably her husband, jumped out of the crowd to go to her aid. Pointed bayonets stopped him.

Taking full advantage of his official role, Captain Matoba addressed the woman harshly. “You leave me no choice but to place you in isolation at the police station if you don’t stop your outrageous and childish outbursts.” His words made the prisoners even angrier.

A slender woman with long blond hair stepped out of the crowd. Without a word, she walked straight to the captain, stopped directly in front of him and spat in his face. The captain reacted instantly. He slapped her across the face several times. She did not fight back.

Following that, a woman with birdlike features began to shriek. She burst out of the crowd, shook her fists, and ran up to the pallet. The guards stood fast and stopped her. All the while, her husband pleaded, “Please, Sjaan, for God’s sake, don’t do this! We are facing enough trouble as it is. Please?”

Captain Matoba stepped down from the platform, walked over to the woman, and slapped her soundly in the face. We gasped at the loud crack of his hand against her skin. “This, woman, is for not listening to your husband, who told you to be quiet!” he hissed. “You should have listened to him!”

From a distance her husband cried out, “She never could keep her mouth shut!” Tears ran down his cheeks.

Captain Matoba returned to the platform and said, “Are there more protesters among you? Please come forward and get all this hostility out of your system. Now!” He spoke calmly and with the complacency of authority.

Two military trucks arrived at the front gate. The male prisoners were instructed to get ready to board and to say

their good-byes. Last-minute instructions about medications, rest, delicate backs, and other concerns were the caring words they heard from their wives.

In the final moments with my father, not much was said, but expressions of love were plentiful. My mother was the last to cling to him before he jumped onto the truck. We all waved until the two vehicles carrying our men were totally out of sight.

I missed my father immediately. I felt cheated out of a happiness I needed and deserved. Joy was now out of my reach.

After the men left, the women began readying their allotted cubicles for the night. Lacking tools of any kind, they found large rocks along the edge of the yard and used them as hammers to drive nails into the wall to hook up the *klamboes*. In the tropical climate, mosquito nets were a necessity. Mosquitoes spread horrible diseases.

Tired and unable to blot out the realization that we were now prisoners of war guarded by Japanese soldiers, I thought of the only thing of importance to me—my father.

I imagined him sitting on a dirty, filthy bed in a jail cell. How could he cope without my mother and Tante Suus dotting on him? How humiliating for him to live under the same roof as common criminals! Obeying someone else's rules would not be easy for him, either. The more I thought of his predicament, the more it saddened me. I covered my head with my pillow to hide my tears. I did my best to remove images of that small figure sitting on a bench in a damp prison cell all by himself, except for the *kakkerlakken*

and *koetoe boesoek*, the cockroaches and bedbugs that ran rampant in such places.

I was thinking so intently about my father that I imagined I heard his voice. His encouraging words told me, “Be brave and strong! I count on your strength and courage to stand by your mother, aunt, and brothers while I’m gone!”

This telepathic communication somehow gave me a boost and the confidence that all would turn out well. The belief that my father had spoken to me through the darkness of the night allowed me to fall asleep peacefully.

Our plight was simply unimaginable. Just a few weeks before, we were living a life of total comfort. Now we were restricted to a life of total confinement. It was hard to have my father taken from me. How difficult it must have been for my mother and the other women to have their husbands taken away. The mean Japanese had done this to us.

Not everyone shared the same thoughts about the Japanese, though. While some felt disdain, others showed outright hatred. There was yet another group who looked at the war philosophically. They considered the presence of the Japanese simply an inevitable episode of the war. According to that group, the war, not the Japanese, was to blame for all our misery. The Christians, who lived by the Bible, preached about loving the enemy. So there it was! Nobody was to blame for anything, yet there was suffering and unhappiness all around us, in fact, all around the world.

The previous months had taught me that life was a precious gift and that it could be taken away in an instant. Life

should be cherished, not destroyed. Would compassion and understanding be better instruments for peace?

I was only a young child, but it worried me to see adults fight and go to war to get what they wanted. To involve the whole world was even more unbelievable.