

Memories of love

Steffie van den Oord

Love in Wartime

EACH NEW GENERATION sees a war differently, discovering ever more new stories. This applies even to the Second World War, about which we seem to know practically everything. Steffie van den Oord (b. 1970) focuses on love in the years 1940-45 in her book *Love in Wartime*, a moving piece of oral history.

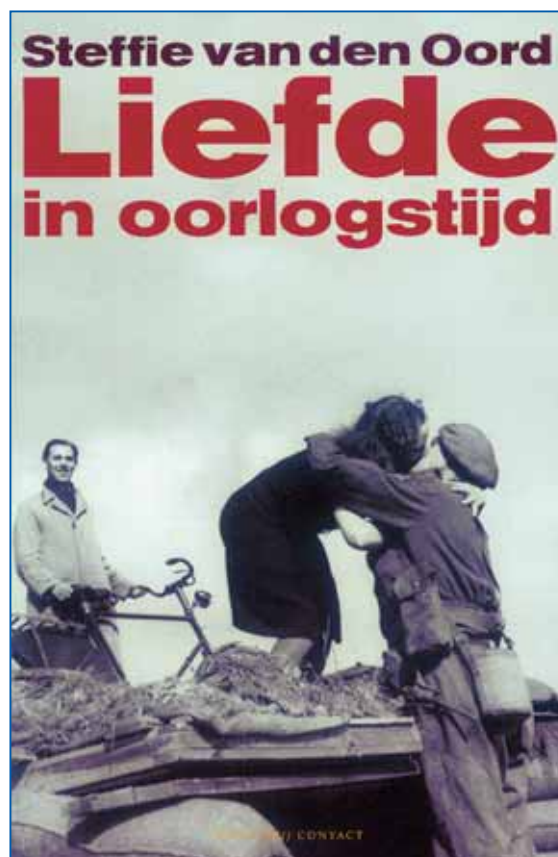
Van den Oord's eighteen stories of love – epic, fatal, fleeting, unhappy and everlasting, set against a treacherous wartime background – are based on a combination of extensive research and in-depth interviews. The storytellers are now in their eighties and nineties. Some find the memories of their teens and twenties so painful that they have never spoken about them before; others beam and glow with pleasure, briefly falling in love all over again.

The author records their memories in monologues as beautiful as they are tragic, full of strange and shocking twists and turns. From these candid outpourings and confessions a picture emerges of 'the war' as human drama, leaving no life untouched. The stories in *Love in Wartime* demonstrate that powerful emotions can drown out all else, that love can give us the strength to survive the most unimaginable horrors.

Van den Oord meets people who fell in love after being thrown together in extraordinary circumstances, or were separated by tragic events. Annie from Rotterdam, aged sixteen, makes love to a sailor from the German navy; forced labourer Ben kisses his first man in a shelter during an air raid; Riek will never see her Canadian again. Young people fall in love in hiding, their world not much larger than a closet.

At times *Love in Wartime* seems almost too beautiful, at times too terrible; it is heartrending throughout, especially when telling of love that began in the camps and has endured to this day: Mau and Rina marry in the transit camp Westerbork, on the night before their transport to Auschwitz where they will lose everything except faith in their love; Louis survives Auschwitz partly through his love for Hannelore, then finds her after the war, pregnant by a German camp official, the man who saved her from deportation.

Steffie van den Oord's book is a marvellously rich addition to the literature of the Second World War.



Steffie van den Oord studied literature and cultural history. She is the author of *Centenarians. Life Stories of Hundred-Year-Olds in The Netherlands* (2002), which sold more than 14,000 copies.

Love in Wartime provides a multifaceted, personal and often intense picture of the lives of ordinary people during the war years.

NRC HANDELSBLAD

Love in Wartime is a wonderful collection of incisive interviews, of a kind seldom seen.

NIEUW ISRAELITISCH WEEKBLAD

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Liefde in oorlogstijd (2004)
349 pp (92,000 words), with
illustrations
7,000 copies sold

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Sample translation from

Love In Wartime by Steffie van den Oord
(Amsterdam: Contact, 2004)

Translated by Liz Waters

Chapter One: The Sailor and His Girl

ANNIE LEIPRECHT-BOONVANG, BORN IN ROTTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS, 1928

KARL LEIPRECHT, BORN IN BAD WALDSEE, GERMANY, 1922

The Loving Couple of Waldsee lives at the top of a hill, with little embroidered Dutch landscapes on the walls and a *Night Watch* made of wool. Karl rises bent-backed out of his easy chair: “Look at these tapestries, aren’t they beautiful! Annie made them herself.” “I hated it here, you see, having to climb all these lousy hills all the time!” says Annie, pointing to the South German scenery through the net curtains. Waldsee, surrounded by woods, is improbably green. Little antiquated dwellings sit yawning on the far bank of a deep dark lake. The bells of the disproportionately large church of St. Peter chime intrusively, as if it belongs in a much bigger town.

“It’s too quiet here for a city girl,” Annie sighs. “But still... Here I have him.” Slightly-built Karl takes his sturdy Rotterdammer by the hand and her expression softens. Annie was at the hairdresser’s recently and she heard an old lady under one of the dryers say “Ah, there’s half of the Loving Couple of Waldsee!” *Das Liebespaar von Waldsee*. “So there are still people here who remember,” says Karl.

Annie: “The sailor and his girl.”

Karl: “*Das Liebespaar*. That was us.”

Annie: “I did as I pleased, war or no war. My family despised the Germans.”

Karl: “And Annie’s father was...”

Annie interrupts him sharply, afraid of what he’s about to say: “I wanted Karl. I didn’t care about anything else.”

Karl: “Nothing and nobody could keep us apart.”

Annie: “Nothing and nobody!”

The old man bends down, rummages for a long time in a low cupboard and produces a photograph.



He plumps down next to Annie.

“Our ship was in Rotterdam harbour. A bunch of fifteen of us, sailors from the Kriegsmarine, were off for a swim at the Sports Foundation Baths in the northern part of the city.”

Annie: “It was a baking hot spring day, April 1944.”

Karl: “I saw her standing in the sun at the tram stop on the Mathenesserlaan, where we had to change trams.”

Annie: “I’m standing near the stop waiting for a friend. The tram draws up, he gets out and looks at me...”

Karl: “Love at first sight! I’ve got to meet that girl, I thought. Yes, she’s the one.”

Annie: “That moment determined the course of the rest of my life, even though I definitely didn’t believe in love at first sight. What a good-looking chap! I fell for him on the spot.”

Karl: “Her radiant expression, and that beautiful blond hair.”

Annie: “His Kriegsmarine uniform – terrific! Not that it was the uniform that got me; I didn’t even notice the other lads with him. It must have been the way he looked at me, with those steely blue eyes. That light blond hair of his too – he still had hair then. We didn’t say very much. I could only speak a few words of German and he only knew a little bit of Dutch. ‘Coming to the *Kino* with us later?’ The cinema. That much I could understand!”

Karl: “The other lads were walking away, but I just stood there for a moment. She was enchanting. And not a bit shy.”

Annie: “Not a bit. I talk to everyone. It didn’t bother me at all that he was a German. When Rotterdam was bombed I was right in the thick of it, of course, in May 1940, when I was a little girl of twelve. ‘I’ve always been good, Mummy, so will I go to heaven?’ I said. We’d been visiting relatives and we happened to be walking home when the centre of Rotterdam was bombed. We dashed into the nearest shop and hid in the cellar. When we came out, everything was gone. In the northern part of the city, where we lived, more was left standing. But in spite of all we’d suffered, I thought of the Germans as people. You had nice ones and there were Kraut bastards. And I was never afraid of them. When I saw my first German, holding a machine gun, I just said, ‘*Gutentag!*’ – the way I’d learned at school. What could a soldier do to you for saying that?”

Karl: “It was eleven or so in the morning when we met on that spring day, wasn’t it *Mutti?*”

Annie: “No, *Vati!* It was later. Maybe one or two in the afternoon. But it’s sixty years ago, I can’t remember exactly.”

Karl: “I do remember being in the swimming pool thinking, what a gorgeous looking girl. Even so, I was late getting to the Luxor Palast that afternoon.”

Annie: “I went with a friend and we waited for him. ‘He’s not going to show up,’ I said, disappointed. ‘Oh well, let’s see the film anyway.’ So in the cinema the main film starts and suddenly there he is, in the dark.”

Karl: “I’d been looking around for Annie. I spotted where she was sitting by the light of the film.”

Annie: “There was another boy sitting next to me, but Karl just walked along our row of seats. ‘Can you go and sit somewhere else? This is my fiancée.’ Fiancée! We didn’t even know each other.”

Karl: “I was quite rude in those days. I told the Dutch chap to move on.”

Annie: “You could see the boy thinking, ‘Crikey, a German! I’d better get out of here,’ and there was Karl, sitting next to me. I can’t remember what film it was, I spent the whole time staring at him. I’d seen most of the films anyway. My father was a pianist. Up until the war he played piano in various cinemas, the introductory programme before the main feature, so I always got in free.”

Karl: “It was *Es war eine rauschende Ballnacht*, a love story starring Zarah Leander and Hans Stüwe. But I was too preoccupied with Annie to take very much in.”

Annie: “Well, the film wasn’t important. I was young, I was on cloud nine. Just sixteen, although I had a bust and everything. I looked eighteen.”

Karl: “I had no idea she was so young. Annie hadn’t told me everything yet...”

Annie interrupts him again. “I’d doctored my ID card so I could always get into the cinema. The best films were for eighteen and older. That evening Karl had to go back out onto the North Sea.”

Karl: “Out towards the Hook of Holland. To check for any sign of the enemy.”

Annie: “He was away every night. But of course I was there waiting on the quayside every morning. I did that right from the start.”

Karl: “She used to stand there waving. I could see her from a long way away. From then on my little dog Purzel, who’d always been on board with me, stayed with Annie when I went out to sea.”

Annie: “When Karl came back, there was no holding Purzel, he was crazy about his master.”

Karl: “When I hugged Annie, Purzel would pee on my trouser-leg for joy.”

Annie: “He was a hunting dog, with long floppy ears. That little creature was a kind of connection with Karl out at sea. If Purzel was with me, everything was alright.”

Karl: “I took Annie to the cinema whenever I could.”

Annie: “Every Sunday matinee at Het Capitool, there I was, surrounded by German soldiers. They had special showings for the Wehrmacht and the Kriegsmarine. Father used to play in the cinema orchestra at Het Capitool even after the war started, so I had to hide from the staff who knew me from those days! Whenever I saw anyone I knew, I bent down or looked the other way.”

Karl: “Annie never got caught.”

A dreamy look comes over Annie’s face: “Karl used to slap my leg and say ‘Gorgeous thighs!’ He thought that was a funny word, thighs. We laughed ourselves silly. He was really my first love.”

Karl: “And I’d never had a girl before, though I tried to seem cocky. I quickly learned to say ‘I love you’ in Dutch, and Annie picked up ‘*Ich liebe dich*’ right away. We never talked about the war.”

Annie: “No, that was taboo.”

Karl: “How could I tell Annie that every time I went out to sea I might not come back?”

Annie: “That’s no subject for lovers. When you’re young, and so happy, what do you care about war?”

Karl: “We did sing.”

Annie: “In the Maas tunnel!”

Karl: “Annie used to walk back with me to the Jobshaven in the evenings, which meant going through that long tunnel under the River Maas. It was still new then. There was usually no one around that late, so we whistled and sang as we walked. ‘Über die Prairie...’

Annie joins in and they sing: “*Klingt mein Lied, durch die Nacht.*”

Karl: “*Hat die Melodie dir der Wind nicht gebracht?*”

Annie: “*Über die Prairie ziehen die Sterne zu dir*

Bringen sollen sie eine Botschaft von mir

Wann kommst du Heim...?”

Karl: “*Ich hoffe ja bald!*”

Annie: “*Komm in die Prairie,*

Und mein Glück weicht nie...”

Karl, radiant: “It sounded so beautiful in the Maas Tunnel, with that echo!”

Annie: “We didn’t care about the war anyway, and at moments like that, not a scrap!”

Karl: “It was wartime. Simple as that. We’d invaded and I was sent to the Netherlands, like it or not. But I didn’t regard the Dutch as my enemies. And I’ve never had anything against the Jews. ‘If Hitler goes after the Jews he’ll lose the war,’ my father said. He was an old social democrat. ‘They’ve got their hands on all the capital in America and everywhere.’ He’d been awarded an Iron Cross first class, so he became an officer, even though he didn’t want to. Father never gave a Nazi salute, he stuck to the old military salute from the First World War: ‘I’m one of the old guard.’ As an officer of a certain age he could get away with it. I used to send him cigars, but we never wrote about the war or what we thought of it. Much too dangerous. Father ended up guarding a Wehrmacht warehouse. He fell in Paris.

“I was of conscription age and I chose the Kriegsmarine because there was less marching in the navy than in the infantry, that was more or less all I knew. I went off to Wilhelmshaven and later, at a base in the Netherlands, they taught me to shoot. Eventually I found myself on a revamped old fishing boat, a steamer,

completely refitted with four- and eight-centimetre guns. I was a junior seaman, then a leading seaman and finally an able seaman with the 12th Minesweeping Flotilla.”

Annie: “That was as high as Karl wanted to go, or they’d have put him in a submarine.”

Karl: “If they’d made me a junior officer I’d have had to leave the ship, and that would have meant leaving Annie. We patrolled the coast and swept for British mines between the Hook of Holland and Den Helder. We laid our own mines too, along the English coast. A dangerous business – at the start of the war there were thirteen fishing boats in the Jobshaven in Rotterdam, towards the end only four were left. The rest had been sunk, mostly by mines. A big steamer like that would go down in no time. I was always lucky on boat number eight. But a lot of the others never came back.”

Annie: “Of course it wasn’t too much fun knowing he had to go to sea. But apart from that he didn’t have a bad time in the Kriegsmarine.”

Karl: “At the end of the First World War the German navy went on strike and backed the revolution. Hitler must have decided that wasn’t going to happen to him. We slept in excellent beds, with white sheets, we always had hot water to wash in and the food was good – a very different story from the eastern front. We used to laugh and say, ‘It’ll be terrible when the war’s over!’ It was hard to imagine life getting any better. Müller, the captain, was a tolerant man. Everyone had a girl in Rotterdam, including the captain. We docked there every day. At night I was at the helm. Sometimes I had to shoot mines too, with a machine gun. They really go up with a bang...”

Annie: “He always got back in one piece, but when he was with me it was hard for us to part. As if we were glued together. He used to have to race through the city like mad to get back to his ship on time.”

Karl: “I’d stand there panting at the helm. But my collar was always straight.”

Annie: “Before Karl left I always straightened his sailor’s collar. Stand up a moment, *Vati!*” Karl slowly gets up from his easy chair. Annie is already standing

in front of him. She tugs at his jacket like a mother with a child and then, in one fluid movement, as if it were yesterday rather than sixty years ago, she pulls an imaginary sailor's collar straight.

With a slightly wistful look in his blue eyes, shaking his head, Karl says, "When there was a really bad storm we stayed in the Jobshaven... Thick fog was good too."

Annie: "Fog, yes, I was always hoping for fog. Because each time he went out I used to think, 'Will he ever come back?'"

Karl: "Once, when we'd been at sea for three days, I just had to see Annie. That evening I went to her house in the Voorburgstraat, a part of town where you never saw Germans on the street, they were all at the docks or in the city centre. It often took a bit of ingenuity for us to get together." His eyes sparkle. "I rang the doorbell and when her grandfather opened the door I said 'Do you have any old records you'd like to sell?' Well, I could hardly say I'd come for my girl."

Annie: "Grandfather came straight back upstairs and said 'That was some Kraut looking for records. What on earth is he thinking of?' I knew at once: it must be *him*. I looked out the window and there was Karl walking away. Quick, grab a coat, race out of the door!"

Karl: "No one knew we were going out together. The whole of the Voorburgstraat was anti-German."

Annie says emphatically: "We had to make sure no one found out! You couldn't make love to the enemy openly, could you? It was an absolute secret."

Karl: "But her uncle worked in a butcher's shop..."

Annie: "I had no idea he worked there. I walked into the shop arm in arm with Karl one day and there he was, behind the counter. It was too late, he'd already seen us. He didn't give me away, but he told my mother 'Keep an eye on your daughter!' So obviously I was going out with someone. In the end I owned up. 'I've got a German boyfriend.' Oh, oh, oh... All hell broke loose. We had a terrific row. Until my grandmother said to my mother, 'Why not take a look at the boy? He's in the navy. Maybe he's nice.' Granddad on my mother's side had

been in the navy too before the war. ‘A German?!’ Mum said. ‘I can’t let him come here! The whole street will see him.’ But Gran said ‘Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. I’ve got a dark-blue raincoat. He can get changed in the church. The neighbours will never notice.’”

Karl: “In the church I put her granny’s raincoat over my uniform, tucked in my collar and hid my cap. Suddenly I was a civilian.”

Annie: “The things love gets up to!”

Karl: “We had coffee with her mother and grandmother. I knew a bit more Dutch by then.”

Annie: “Afterwards Gran said ‘Let her go out with the boy. Those two will be happy together.’ ‘Well...’ Mum sighed. She could tell I was crazy about him. ‘Better let them then, I suppose.’”

Karl: “Her mother was so nice! I’ve never met a more a tolerant woman in my life. The war was nearly over, but even so she let her daughter go out with a German.”

Annie: “It was risky of course. We already knew that girls with German boyfriends would have their hair shaved off when the war was over. But my mother actually approved in the end. In spite of the fact...” Annie hesitates. She seems unsure of herself all of a sudden. “I never, ever tell anyone.” For a fraction of a second she looks to Karl for support. Then she goes on “In spite of the fact that my father was Jewish, though that’s not how I saw him. He may have been born a Jew, but he never lived like one.”

Karl: “I didn’t know that then. I didn’t find out until years after the war. I never saw her dad when I was in the Netherlands, and Annie didn’t wear a yellow star.”

Annie: “No, of course not. My mother wasn’t Jewish, only my father. Early on in the war he was still allowed to work. As long as he had his music he was happy – he came from a whole family of artists. So as far as I could see nothing had changed. Of course he had to wear a yellow star, I sewed it on his coat myself. But I couldn’t have cared less about that. No one said anything, either. ‘There we

go,’ father said when he saw the star fixed to his coat. ‘That’s very neat. Thank you, my girl!’ It didn’t bother me at all; I was still a child really. When my parents wanted to discuss things – the war, the new regulations – they made sure I couldn’t join in. “Annie, you go on up to Granny and Granddad.” That meant my mother’s parents, who lived above us. My parents were very protective. I was their only child and they never told me anything.



Jacob Boonvang

“Father was frightened, I remember. When he heard a plane he’d hide under the stairs. I used to call out, “Daddy, stay there. The bombers are coming!” Just to tease him a bit. I didn’t realise how serious it was, I really didn’t. Jacob Boonvang was his name, his stage name was Jacques Bonevito. While father was playing I wasn’t allowed to speak. I had to be quiet as a mouse. He’d get completely carried away, totally absorbed in the music. He wasn’t interested in anything else. He never even knocked a nail into the wall, frightened he’d hit his fingers. Mother was crazy about him. She used to say ‘No need to do anything,

I'll do it.' Father gave me piano lessons too, but that wasn't a great success. I was pigheaded. I always knew better. So I was taught by the best piano teacher he could find among his circle of friends."

"There was only one time my father really wanted to hit me. I was teaching a friend, just for a laugh, sitting beside her at the piano. My father walked into the room just as she struck a couple of false chords. He couldn't stand it! He thought I was playing out of tune and he lunged at me, but I ducked, so he hit my friend instead.

"Before that, when I was little, I used to go with him when he played in cinemas or theatres. I wasn't terribly fond of him though, to be honest. Father was always distant. He never hugged me and he didn't show much interest in what I was doing.

"My parents' mixed marriage protected him for a long time, but later in the war he disappeared, around 1943, before I ever met Karl. He'd been away before, as a musician, but this time he didn't come home. Sometimes I asked where he was, but mother kept saying 'He's on tour.' I didn't ask questions, I just believed her."

Annie is silent for a moment. Then she goes on: "Some time in the early summer of 1944 – the weather was beautiful – Karl and I went out together and walked a long way, out beyond the edge of the city. Until we came to an old windmill."

Karl: "Next to that mill, that's where it happened."

Annie: "That's where my son arrived on the scene, so to speak. We laughed and made love. There was no opening in the front of his uniform trousers, instead there were buttons at the sides. You could fold the front right down and his trousers would fall to the ground. I thought that was funny. We were careful, we used a condom."

Karl: "A *Wehrmachtskondom*. But it burst."

Annie: "Oops. Bull's-eye. I was pregnant. Actually I was quite pleased, but I didn't dare tell anyone at home. For three months I pretended I was still having

my periods. I was cunning too, a friend gave me her used cotton sanitary towels and my mother washed them thinking they were mine! But I was very nauseous. I vomited every morning. Mother said ‘You keep being sick. What’s the matter with you?’ In the end I had to tell her. ‘I think I’m going to have a baby.’ ‘Well,’ she sighed. ‘Then we’ll bring it up too.’ That was all! She didn’t scream at me, in fact she didn’t have anything else to say on the matter, she even ordered a cot and a pram. All I had to do was wait. I kept going to the docks to see where he’d got to. Karl’s visits were very irregular by then. After a while he stopped coming. Then one day he was back, with a gun.”

Karl: “After Operation Market Garden we had to be armed at all times.”

Annie: “Mother said, ‘He’s not coming in here with a gun!’ I whispered ‘Get rid of it, quick, in the hall, under the stairs.’ He couldn’t come into our house carrying a gun. If they’d caught him...!”

Karl: “Inside the blue raincoat I had a loaf of bread, a big piece of meat and some coffee. We thought at the time – there was a certain amount of panic – that we were going to have to scuttle the boat. The British were coming, so we’d shared out all the ship’s food supplies between us.”

Annie: “And Mother says, ‘I’m not taking it.’ She was too proud to take food from the Germans. Even though the famine of ’44-’45 had already started by then. ‘Mum,’ I begged her. ‘Take something, please.’ But she wouldn’t.”

Karl: “Since her mother didn’t want the food, we went out for a meal. Steak and cauliflower at Café du Nord.”

Annie: “A pretty chic place.”

Karl: “‘Waiter,’ I said. ‘I’ll give you a packet of tobacco. Will that get us a good meal this evening?’”

Annie: “When I got home that night Mum asked ‘Are you hungry? I’ve made semolina pudding.’ That was all we had left to eat and I couldn’t stand the stuff. ‘No thanks, Mum.’”

Karl: “Once we went to the Wehrmacht canteen together and Annie ate ten pancakes!”

Annie: “How can anyone eat that many, right? But I told myself I was eating for tomorrow as well!”

Karl: “In the end we didn’t have to sink the ship, but we sailed flat out back to Germany.”

Annie: “I was in my sixth month and suddenly he had to leave. It was such a rushed parting. ‘Our love is very strong,’ Karl said. ‘*Ich komme wieder.*’ I’ll be back. But my mother said, ‘You’ll never see *him* again.’”

Karl: “That was November 1944. When we docked in Wilhelmshaven the boiler needed repairs, so we were all given leave until it was ready. I told the captain my girl in Rotterdam was pregnant and I wanted to bring her to Germany. The captain agreed, which was unbelievable. He told me he’d left his camera behind at his girlfriend’s house in The Hague. ‘You can pick up my camera and your girl at the same time.’ Because of the Dutch railway strike, the trains were only running as far as the border. From there on I hitchhiked. I got a lift on an army truck and by a roundabout route I arrived at the Wehrmachtshim late in the evening. First thing next morning I went to see Annie.”

Annie, clearly moved: “Oh, he brought baby clothes. So sweet! Those tiny jumpers. And then he asked if I’d go to Germany with him. I was so happy. Yes, of course I’d go with him. I didn’t have to think about it for five minutes.”

Karl: “I said, ‘Girl, you’ll only be hungry here. You’ll be much better off with my mother in southern Germany.’”

Annie: “And I’ve never been sorry. In spite of everything.”

Karl: “We were together all day. I didn’t take her home till late in the evening, wearing my blue raincoat. Then I set off back to the Wehrmachtshim. On the way I came across a Dutchman on a bicycle. I took out my pistol and said ‘I’m sorry, but I need your bicycle.’ ‘But I’ve got a licence to own a bike,’ he spluttered. ‘I’m employed at the gasworks.’ ‘Just give me your address and I’ll bring the bike back.’ Next morning I cycled to Delft and then on to The Hague, to see the captain’s girlfriend. She was very sad, she was in love too, but the captain had been married a long time. ‘Sir,’ I said, when I found the address of the man

from the gasworks. ‘Here’s your bicycle.’ ‘That’s amazing,’ he said, stunned, ‘A German bringing back a bicycle!’”

Annie: “The next day I went off to get all the papers in order. I had to fill out forms saying I was volunteering to go and work in Germany. It was the only way of getting permission to go with Karl.”

Karl: “Marrying was complicated. Let’s wait till the war’s over, we thought. It won’t be long now.”

Annie: “Fortunately no one at the employment agency noticed I was pregnant. I’d put on one of my mother’s full-skirted dresses and a thick coat over the top, so the bulge wouldn’t show. Otherwise they’d never have believed I wanted to go to Germany to work. They didn’t question me too closely, luckily enough.”

Karl: “They were happy to have every worker they could get their hands on, so they weren’t going to make difficulties.”

Annie: “I was still a minor, so my mother had to sign all the papers. My father wasn’t around. ‘On tour,’ Mum said. He’d been gone a long time, but that didn’t bother me.”

Karl: “Annie filled in all the paperwork for permission to go to Germany as a *Fremdarbeiterin*, a foreign worker.”

Annie: “That left my mother with the cot and the pram. But she was pleased I was going to Germany. At least I’d be well fed there. That was the most important thing. There was less and less food in Rotterdam. Towards the end of the war my mother went to work in a butcher’s shop and sometimes she slipped a bit of meat inside her bra when no one was looking. My uncle claims that later, when there was nothing left at all, he cooked and ate grass.”

A sudden outburst from Karl: “That was your own fault! The railway strike made food distribution impossible, so of course the Germans said, ‘We’re not going to do it!’”

Annie doesn’t react, while Karl goes on unperturbed: “We got a lift to Germany on an open truck carrying gun parts. We left at ten in the evening. With a full Kriegsmarine kit bag.”

Annie: “And Purzel sitting in the top of the kit bag.”

Karl: “We travelled to the border by night with our headlights dimmed – it was too dangerous in daylight. Everything was blacked out. It was pitch dark.”

Annie: “Oh, and it was so cold. It never stopped raining. There you are, pregnant, and you can’t sit down properly on those freezing cold guns! The truck bumped and shook so much that I wondered whether I had any chance of having a healthy baby.”

Karl: “There were air raid warnings during the night.”

Annie: “We had to jump down from the truck and lie on the ground near the wheels, hoping there wouldn’t be a direct hit.”

Karl: “In Enschede we finally got off the truck and caught a train to Wilhelmshaven.”

Annie: “Purzel’s head was sticking out of the kit bag, and at every checkpoint we had to shove him inside and close the bag.”

Karl: “Purzel was so sweet, he didn’t whine or bark. He didn’t even pee in the kit bag.”

Annie: “When we got to Wilhelmshaven Karl took me to the station canteen. ‘I’m going to my ship,’ he said. ‘I’ll give the captain his camera, then we’ll both go and see my mother.’ I didn’t know where he lived. I didn’t even know his surname. I was so young, so silly and so madly in love. Perhaps other people are less naïve, but I had absolute faith everything would work out. So there I am, sitting in the canteen, when the air raid siren goes off. Everyone rushes out of the door and into the air raid shelter. But I thought to myself, I can’t leave, I’ve got to stay here, otherwise Karl will never find me. How can you find someone if you don’t even know their full name? A man was shouting at me, telling me to get out of there, immediately!”

Karl: “The captain gave me fourteen days’ leave. The air raid siren sounded, but I raced across town as fast as I could go. To Annie. Incendiary bombs were falling. The only sensible thing was to dash into the first shelter I came to, but I kept on running – love was stronger than fear. ‘I have to find Annie, she doesn’t

know where to go,’ I told myself. It was a bit late to think of that. By the time I got to the station I was puffing fit to burst.”

Annie: “They made me leave the canteen. Just as I was getting up, Karl came in.”

Karl: “Fate!”

Annie: “If he’d got there two minutes later that would have been it. We ran into the air raid shelter together.”

Karl: “I dragged her after me, fast as the wind.”

Annie: “I held his hand all the time we were in the shelter.”

Karl: “When we came out, all the buildings around us were rubble. Half the station had gone and the station canteen had been wiped off the map. Still, by ten the next morning they’d managed to put some trains together. We got into an army train full of soldiers on leave.”

Annie: “There I sat, among all those boys. Then the military police arrived to check the train – all macho types. I had to get off.”

Karl: “‘But that’s my girl,’ I protested. ‘We’re getting married, she’s pregnant, she has to come with me.’ They didn’t care, the stupid asses. So I shouted, ‘I’m only just back from the front!’ and suddenly everything was okay.”

Annie: “Clever of you, *Vati!*”

Karl: “In Waldsee we got ration cards straight away and Annie was registered as a *Fremdarbeiterin*.”

Annie: “I had to work in a little factory, sewing uniforms for the Wehrmacht. I didn’t like it at all. Not because it was for the German army. It was just that I hated sewing.”

Karl: “Well, the boss of the factory was an old friend of mine. ‘She’s my fiancée,’ I told him. ‘Does she really have to work?’ ‘Okay, she can stay home.’ She was allowed to have the baby first. I had to report to Wilhelmshaven.”

Annie: “I went with him as far as the station in Ulm, and there I was caught in the bombing again, with my big tummy. I travelled back alone with Purzel to Karl’s mother and sisters. They spoke a Swabian dialect of German and I

couldn't understand a word. The food was inedible too. Wet potatoes, all watery. No Dutch girl would eat potatoes like that, they have to be firm and dry.

“But the worst thing was, I didn't get on with his sisters and especially his mother. They gave me a hard time. They were so old-fashioned! Waldsee was a town stuck in the past, more of a village actually, very Catholic and very conservative. Everyone talked about everyone else. They knew when you'd been to the toilet, they even knew what you'd done there. Hopeless! All I had was Purzel. The second my mother-in-law closed the door behind her – she went to church every morning – I whistled to him to join me in bed. A quick cuddle. But my mother-in-law found out ('Ugh, a dog in the bed!') and she got rid of Purzel. That was terrible.

The baby was due in March. I had no idea how it was meant to come out of my belly; I simply waited to see what happened. I lay down on the divan, felt ill, and an hour later there he was. Against all the odds I'd given birth to a healthy boy. He had to be christened Karl-Heinz, my mother-in-law told me. I was a stranger in Waldsee and I thought, 'Well, if that's how it has to be...' I wasn't allowed any say in the matter. I couldn't even tell Karl we had a son. Germany was in chaos by then.”

Karl: “I got away without a scratch until April 1945, but then we were ordered to tow nine Dutch freighters to Germany. We sailed slowly, terribly slowly; we were easy prey to the British bombers. Six out of the nine ships in our convoy were hit. I was just preparing to fire a shell when we saw tracer coming towards us. A bullet hit my middle finger and tore it off. And my buttocks were full of shrapnel. Of thirty men on board, ten were wounded and five were killed. The Brits hit us good and proper. I reckoned I was lucky I'd only had a finger blown off. A medic took the injured to land and eventually we arrived at the naval hospital in Heiloo. There was a fragment of finger left and I was bleeding like an ox.”

Annie: “Karl didn't want to go back to war, so every time the wound started to heal he put sugar on it, to make it fester so he'd get another week's leave.”

Karl: “‘This way the war will end quietly,’ I thought. But they put me on a military transport bound for Bad Segeberg in Schleswig-Holstein. The naval hospital there was bombed soon after I arrived, even though it was flying a Red Cross flag. A lot of people were killed. Suddenly I was discharged and declared fit. And since I was well, I was ordered to march to Berlin immediately. I had to go and defend Hitler as an infantryman. There had been so much bombing that no trains were running in the whole of Schleswig-Holstein. ‘How am I supposed to get to Berlin?’ I asked. ‘Walk!’ they said – hundreds of kilometres, and I was still in bandages. It was early May 1945. Kiel had already been bombed and Hamburg was occupied. But I had to go. After we’d gone about fifty kilometres we saw British troops in the distance. We were walking along the *Autobahn*, hundreds of soldiers, lads from the Kriegsmarine, the infantry, all mixed up together, all moving towards Berlin. But I slipped away. I wanted to get to Waldsee, to Annie – fast. There was no point any more... The Brits were ahead of us, in jeeps. It was too late.”

Annie: “In the meantime I’d got to know two Dutch forced labourers in Waldsee. They brought me newspapers and film star magazines. When they went into town I could go with them. Oh, that made my mother-in-law furious! She thought I was going out with those boys. Certainly not! Soon after that the French and the Moroccans arrived. Waldsee was frightened. None of the women dared go out, terrified of being raped, but I was Dutch, so I simply walked into town with the forced labourers. I remember going into one shop and the Dutchmen said, ‘Just take what you need, we’re not paying.’ You only do something like that if you’re planning to leave, not if you want to stay, but the forced labourers were kind enough to take a whole crate of tinned meat for me. I put it away for my wedding.

“Before long the forced labourers went home. Then the French who were occupying Waldsee told me I had to leave too. As a *Fremdarbeiterin* there was no reason for me to stay in Germany, they said. It was two or three weeks after the surrender. Karl-Heinz was only two months old. How could I take the little chap

with me in an open truck? If I'd done that, they'd have put him in a home, because I was a minor, and I'd gone to Germany voluntarily too. I'll lose my baby, I thought. I'll have to leave him behind in Germany, with my mother-in-law. I hated her by then. I wondered where Karl was and whether he'd come back alive.

"I climbed into the back of the lorry feeling utterly miserable and helpless. At the Dutch border we all had to go into an office one by one. A man behind a desk said to me, 'So, you've been with German soldiers. Another Kraut-whore!' I've no idea how he knew anything about me. Someone must have given me away, but I never found out who it was. 'No!' I protested. 'I've only been with one soldier. I'm not a whore!' He looked at me in surprise. He didn't have any more questions. That went alright, I thought.

"I went straight to Rotterdam with a lot of other repatriated people. But at home in the Voorburgstraat, no one answered the door. Granny and Granddad who lived upstairs weren't home either. Where had they all got to? I went to Café du Nord, and who should I see there dancing but my mother and my aunt! I flew inside. 'Oh, Annie!' Mum cried. 'There you are! At last...' She hugged me, she was so happy – so was I. We'd only just got back inside the house when I heard familiar footsteps on the stairs. It was my father! He was home from a card game and he was really happy to see me after such a long, long time. Of course Mum had told him everything, how I'd got pregnant and gone to Germany. He never said an unkind word on the subject. Father was relieved that everything had worked out alright: the war was over and we hadn't come off too badly. Obviously Father's 'tour' was over now. He wasn't the kind of person to talk much about what he'd been through, in fact he never told me anything about it. Perhaps he wanted to spare me all that. I'd had a sheltered upbringing. I didn't dwell on what had happened to him. Everything seemed to be back to normal.

"Then at three o'clock one morning the doorbell rang. My mother got up. Police at the door. 'You have a daughter, yes?' 'Yes,' Mum told them. 'She's in bed.' 'She has to get up right away!' I heard the policeman say. They took me

and put me in a cell with all sorts of other women and girls. It was impossible to sleep, of course. Next day they interrogated me about what I'd been doing in Germany, and why and what for. 'I've got a German boyfriend. We want to get married.' That was all I told them. I was taken to a home run by Catholics, because I was still under age. I was sprayed with DDT and checked for fleas. I had to take all my clothes off in front of a doctor. He examined me from all sides, so he saw my stretch marks. 'Well,' he said. 'So you've had a child by a German. Where is it?' 'I don't have a child,' I said, because I knew they'd take Karl-Heinz away from me. They interrogated me for three days and all that time I insisted I hadn't had a baby. 'I used to be fat and I lost a lot of weight during the war, that's why I have these marks.'

"I was given a stupid green uniform to wear. I wasn't allowed to wear my own clothes. It was a very strict institution. My mother went to all the government agencies one by one. 'I'll get you out of there!' She was absolutely determined. 'Do everything the nuns tell you. Make sure you're extremely obedient and polite, otherwise I'll never be able to get you out.' That wasn't in my character at all, I don't like people telling me what to do, and I thought it was absurd that I was locked up because I loved Karl. All the same, I did everything they said, whether I felt like it or not. Housework, scrubbing the floor, dusting all over the place. With all those other girls. Some had run away from home, some had German lovers. And we weren't allowed out. That was the worst thing about it for a young girl like me. In one respect I was lucky. My parents had always told me I could make up my own mind later on about what I wanted to be: Jewish, Catholic or Protestant. There was no religion at home. My friend was a Catholic and she went to church a lot. One day I went with her, just to keep her company – I was about thirteen – and I noticed she had an incredibly handsome priest, with beautiful wavy black hair. I fell head over heels in love with the Catholic faith; I even had myself baptised. Now that I was stuck there with the nuns, it came in handy. I was a dedicated church-goer. Gracious me, what a good Catholic I was! I did everything I could to get myself out of there."

Karl: “I had no idea Annie was with the nuns. I was a prisoner of war of the British. They’d taken our belts with the swastika buckles as souvenirs and we wore their belts. They put us in a forest surrounded by barbed wire. We slept in an old barracks, or under the stars. The British weren’t actually all that unfriendly, but there was very little to eat and hardly anything to drink. One night, after the British guards had walked past, I crawled under the barbed wire and ran away with some of the others. We walked for hours through the forest that night. Until we got close to the Russians. Then we fled in the opposite direction.

“I’d taken the brass buttons off my uniform along with all the badges, so with an old overcoat on top I looked like a civilian. Eventually we got to Thüringen, which was held by the Americans. They gave me some food without asking to see my papers. They even let me travel south with them for a bit; they were going to pick up German prisoners of war in Italy and had no idea they were giving a lift to a German able seaman! They dropped me in Ulm, in the French zone. I’d heard from other soldiers on the run that you shouldn’t travel by train there because the French would take you back to France as a prisoner. So I walked to Waldsee, more than sixty kilometres. That was nothing, because I was on my way to see Annie and our baby. It would have been born by then. On the way I stocked up on supplies at a farm. The farmer had used Russian prisoners of war to work his land and he was terrified they’d come back and take revenge. I gave him my pistol – I’d managed to hide it all that time – in exchange for some smoked meat, bread and cheese. I arrived in Waldsee at night, with my food parcel on my back, walking through the woods. It was a clear night; you could see the white church of St. Peter reflected in the lake, crystal clear and as beautiful as ever. It was a blissful feeling, walking those final few kilometres home. The lights were on in the house. Mother was sitting in the living room with my sisters, but Annie was gone. Sent away... I was stunned when they told me that. Our little boy was there, though. Suddenly I was a single father! For days I didn’t go out, I was so deeply unhappy, and also hiding from the French. But then my old boss asked the

French commander if I could come and work in the garage again. He was repairing trucks and cars for the French, so they agreed. I tried to contact Annie. Where on earth had she got to and how was she doing?! There was no international postal service yet, so soon after the war. All I could do was send a Red Cross letter.”

Annie: “To my parents, yes. But I was in a home. I had no idea he’d written to me. Karl sent several Red Cross letters. In the last one he wrote, ‘Why haven’t I heard from you?’ I didn’t read them until I got out six months later, when my mother finally arranged my release. It seems she – or was it Father? – didn’t want to give them to me before then. Perhaps they were hoping I’d forget all about Karl.”

Karl: “I sent Annie a photo of myself holding Karl-Heinz. My hand was in the picture so you could see that the middle finger had been shot off.”

Annie: “It took my breath away! There they were again, at last, my Karl and my Karl-Heinz! The first thing my mother said was, ‘He’s lost a finger!’ I snatched the photo back out of her hand. ‘Let me look!’”

Karl: “I thought maybe Annie didn’t want me any more, now I’d been injured. But eventually I got a letter from her: she wanted to come back!”

Annie: “But it wasn’t easy.”

Karl: “First the French investigated whether I’d been a Nazi, then they looked into whether my father and brothers were Nazis. Fortunately they weren’t, any more than I was. The French wrote whole reports about me. It was six months before I received a document covered in stamps. It gave Annie permission to come, but we had to get married within fourteen days of the date it was issued.”

Annie: “By the time the document came through the letter box it had already expired. That’s how slow the post was.”

Karl: “So Annie wrote, ‘I need another one.’”

Annie: “Same story!”

Karl: “Again it took weeks to arrive. The one after that expired on the way as well.”

Annie: “It took two years, in total.”

Karl: “Two years of waiting! For a piece of paper. Of course they were hoping we’d give up.”

Annie, smiling at Karl: “But that wasn’t going to happen.”

Karl: “In all those years of waiting and hoping, I kept hearing that song in my head.” He suddenly starts singing: “*Über die Prairie klingt mein Lied durch die Nacht, Hat die melodie dir der Wind nicht gebracht? Wann kommst du heim?*”

Annie: “*Ich hoffe ja bald!* All those years I had a suitcase packed so I could set off as soon as the paperwork finally reached us in time. That wasn’t until the summer of 1947.”

Karl: “We’d only seen each other once in all that time. I wasn’t allowed to just travel to the border. If you wanted to move from one occupied zone to the next you had to have a permit. But there was an SPD party conference coming up in Dortmund. I’d always been a social democrat and I decided to go, so I got a permit! I wrote to Annie, telling her to be at the border near Venlo at a certain time, so we could meet.”

Annie, eagerly: “Off to Venlo, with my mother!”

Karl: “We’d arranged to meet in Café Backus, on the border in a kind of no-man’s land. There she was!”

Annie: “When I saw him it was as if...”

Karl: “As if she’d never been away.”

Annie: “I’d brought a roast chicken with me for Karl. He ate it while we were talking. That’s how hungry he was.”

Karl: “You could hardly get anything in Germany. Only fifty grams of meat on the ration. Per week! Annie had brought chocolate for our little boy too. Unfortunately I couldn’t bring Karl-Heinz with me. He was still too young.”

Annie: “I was happy I could at least see Karl. I’d been living with my parents in Rotterdam all that time and I often went dancing with my aunt. I loved whirling about on the dance floor, but I never looked at other men, even though

my mother was so keen for me to meet a nice Rotterdammer and stay. She was always pointing: there's a nice man, and there's a nice man.

“One morning, as I was walking from my parents' house to the public baths, I ran into a girl who lived in our street. She knew all about us! I still don't know how. I'd kept my relationship with Karl a complete secret. But then, people always do talk. This girl came and stood right in front of me. ‘Filthy whore!’ she shouted. ‘You do it with Germans.’ So I grabbed her and thwacked her. She didn't try that again. You're not a whore if you go with one boy, are you?! I was furious. Still, that was the last time it ever got me into trouble. It was lucky I didn't come home till six months after the war, when everyone had calmed down a bit. They'd have shaved my head if I'd come back any sooner.”

“My mother wasn't happy that her only child was leaving, but she knew she couldn't stop me and she reconciled herself to it. She came with me as far as Utrecht. We said goodbye there. One of my uncles had given me a whole carton of cigarettes, even though I only smoked occasionally, to show off, the way you do when you're young.”

Karl: “In Germany you could get two hundred marks for one packet of cigarettes! On the black market, that is. You couldn't buy them at all otherwise.”

Annie: “I had to change trains in Frankfurt. People were hanging out of the trains, they were so full. Everyone was on the move in those days, off to the farms to exchange all kinds of things for potatoes. I had two suitcases and several large bags with me. It was all I could do to drag them onto the platform, then I just sat down on the biggest suitcase with no hope of ever getting onto that overcrowded train. When a porter walked by I asked if he'd like to help me. I gave him a packet of cigarettes.”

Karl: “Two hundred marks!”

Annie: “The porter was very happy. We sat there and had a smoke, then he helped me on to the train. By the time I arrived in Aulendorf late that evening I'd missed the last train to Waldsee. You weren't really supposed to be out on the

street at night then. I was the only passenger at the station and in the end I rang Karl's boss, who had a phone."

Karl: "I was just settling down to play cards with some friends when my boss stormed in: 'Your girlfriend's at the station in Aulendorf!' My God, I thought, how can I get there? In a shed outside there was an old bicycle with flat tyres. I quickly fixed the tyres, pumped them up and set off in the dark, sneaking through the woods to Aulendorf. Annie, Annie, Annie...! How I'd missed her!"

Annie: "I was still sitting waiting with my suitcases. There was no one around, the streets were deserted. Nothing except for a dog barking in the distance. And suddenly I didn't know what to think. Will he come for me...? I began to have doubts. What was I doing here, all on my own in this mountainous country? Shouldn't I have stayed in my own good old Rotterdam where I belonged? There were stars in the sky, but no other light. Eventually Karl turned up and all my doubts vanished."

Karl: "We were able to stay overnight with a friend. A mate from the Kriegsmarine. Next day we took the first train to Waldsee."

Annie: "There was little Karl-Heinz... Standing in the doorway! He'd grown into a chubby toddler and naturally he didn't want to have anything to do with this strange woman from Holland."

Karl: "But Annie had chocolate with her."

Annie: "Lots of chocolate. I enticed him with that. Before long he didn't want to leave my side. 'Mama, Schokolade?' he kept asking, sweet as could be. 'Yes, I've still got some for you!' That made my mother-in-law even more jealous. No, I didn't get a friendly reception from her. She thought I was too modern. I had very high heels, eight centimetres or so. I had three pairs of court shoes with all sorts of bows and things you could fix to them – those were the fashion in Rotterdam – so it seemed as if I had twelve pairs."



Karl-Heinz

Karl: “My sisters were so jealous of that! Annie had great dresses too. They didn’t. She wore lipstick, something you never saw in Waldsee. She even had a coat with silver-fox trim.”

Annie: “I was spoilt, as an only child, and I dressed far too strikingly. I should have come as a farm girl.”

Karl: “She stood right out! The farmers here still wore those long old-fashioned smocks. The women wore black to church. You weren’t even supposed to kiss in public, although we did, of course.”

Annie: “We didn’t give a damn about the rest of the world, really, after all we’d been through.”

Karl: “When we walked through the village arm in arm people used to say, ‘Look, there’s the *Liebespaar von Waldsee!*’”

He looks proudly at Annie, who smiles at him. Then he goes on: “We had to arrange the wedding in no time at all, the famous fourteen days were almost up. First I asked Annie, ‘Are you sure you still want to marry me?’”

Annie: “You didn’t ask me anything of the kind! You never proposed. You were so sure of yourself. My mother-in-law insisted we should have a church wedding. His sisters bought special little crosses to hang over the bed – how straight-laced can you get?! When a priest turned up to bless the crosses with holy water I couldn’t stop laughing. ‘We’ve already been *doing* it for ages!’”

Karl: “We got all the paperwork done by the end of the first afternoon. We had permission to marry. That evening the choir came and sang outside the window.”

Annie: “His cousin gave me a wedding dress with a train and a veil, and it fitted me perfectly. Karl borrowed an old dinner suit and a top hat from the tailor. We had to improvise.”

Karl: “There wasn’t any petrol, but my boss arranged for a Mercedes that ran on wood gas. It had an enormous boiler on the back and the driver looked completely black from stoking it by the time we got in.”

Annie: “Sensational! It wasn’t even very far to the church. We could have walked.”

Karl: “We were married in the baroque church of St. Peter.”

Annie: “Karl-Heinz held my train. When he saw the priest with his mitre he pointed and said, ‘Look Mum, St. Nicholas is here too!’”

Karl: “The whole of Waldsee came out for the occasion. I knew a lot of people, I belonged to all the clubs and associations.”

Annie: “Everyone was crying. We were the only ones who weren’t. We walked out of the church beaming.”

Karl: “People were very moved to see us finally getting married. Everyone in Waldsee knew how long we’d had to wait.”

Annie: “You could see people thinking: they’re together at last, in spite of everything. Like a romantic movie.”

Karl: “Food was still scarce, but I’d repaired farm carts and tractors in exchange for home-distilled Schnapps and fifty litres of cider.”

Annie: “And there was the crate of tinned meat the Dutch forced labourers had given me.”

Karl: “All that time I’d insisted, ‘That meat belongs to Annie. We’re not going to touch it till our wedding day.’”

Annie: “And everyone enjoyed it. Serving meat – that was really something.”

Karl: “That night we had a party at the café. Friends had arranged for a band to come.”

Annie: “But Karl can’t dance. He has two left feet. I had to dance with our witness, I remember that much. I got so drunk I don’t remember anything else about our wedding. I’d never drunk alcohol before. When I went out dancing with my aunt I always stuck to lemonade like a good girl. But people kept toasting our love and every time I threw back another glass. I don’t know how I got home, but I fell fast asleep.”

Karl: “On our wedding night.”

Annie: “Fortunately we hadn’t exactly been saving ourselves for that night. But his family didn’t half look sourly at me when I rolled out of bed the next morning.”

Karl: “My mother kept shaking her head: ‘It’ll never work out, not with a spoilt city girl like that.’”

Annie: “I’d never learnt to cook. At home Mum wouldn’t even let me put on the kettle for tea. Karl managed to get enough food from the farmers, often with Karl-Heinz on the back of his bicycle so that they’d give him a litre of milk for free, but how was I supposed to prepare it? I never told anyone I couldn’t cook. They’d send me packing, I thought. When my mother-in-law cooked at the old-fashioned kitchen range, I watched her very closely. I memorised exactly what she did. And whatever she cooked one day, I made the next. In no time I was preparing Swabian dishes, which are quite complicated, and she couldn’t stand it.

She watched me casually tossing off all those specialities, or so it seemed, and decided I was no longer allowed in the kitchen.”

Karl: “She drove Annie crazy. That’s why we left. Waldsee was full of refugees who’d been bombed out of their homes and there was an enormous housing shortage after all that bombing, but we managed to get hold of a tiny basement.”

Annie: “Our bed, a table, two chairs, and the basement was full. We had to put Karl-Heinz’s bed on top of a cupboard during the day, otherwise there wouldn’t have been room to turn round. But it was great to be by ourselves at last. We didn’t have any curtains, so we hung conifer branches over the basement windows. As soon as they started to drop their needles we fetched new ones. No shortage of trees in Waldsee.”

Karl: “That made it look cosy as well.”

Annie: “Then my mother-in-law sent a woman from child welfare after me. She told her our basement was no place for Karl-Heinz. Well, I’ve always been very clean, so the basement was spick and span when the lady came to inspect it. She looked at everything, examined the cot, then told me she didn’t understand why she’d been sent to see us. I refused to let my mother-in-law into my house for years after that. The bitch.”

Karl: “I was a member of the bridge club, the choir, the volunteer fire brigade, the trades union, the SPD. I was out every night.”

Annie: “Leaving me alone in the basement with a crackly radio. Until one evening I thought: just you wait. I made myself up to look really nice: lipstick, high heels and my most revealing dress. I walked into town and sat on a convenient bench. When Karl came home I was gone. He searched all over Waldsee! He walked right past me twice in the dark, but I hid behind a tree. Let him search, I thought. He was worried, because I was modern and the French always whistled when they saw me and called out, ‘Bonjour, mademoiselle!’”

Karl: “She was wearing her low-cut dress and I had no idea where she’d got to.”

Annie: “It was midnight when I came home. ‘Where on earth have you been?’ Karl said. I told him ‘If you can stay out every night, then so can I. There are plenty of Frenchmen here, I could have one just like that.’” Triumphant, she adds: “He never left me again!”

Karl: “I gave everything up: the choir, the card games... I never went out. Annie was worth more to me than any of that. But she did have to promise not to wear her low-cut dress ever again.”

Annie: “I had to exchange it for butter and eggs. After a while I had only one dress left. The rest were hanging in the farmers’ wardrobes.”

“I didn’t tell Karl until years and years after the war,” Annie goes on, “that my father was Jewish. I didn’t know how he’d react. Maybe he wouldn’t like it. He was a German after all. I was afraid of losing the love of my life, even then. He was more important to me than anything else. It was only after I’d heard Karl talk about the Jews quite a few times, and not negatively at all, that I dared mention it.”

Karl: “I’d always thought all the propaganda about the *Herrenvolk* and the *Untermenschen* was ridiculous. ‘All human beings are equal,’ my father used to say. I’ll never forget the train with cattle trucks that I saw in Germany at the end of the war. It was full of concentration camp prisoners, exhausted and starving. A few of us gave them water and bread. The SS men who were guarding them didn’t dare say anything, because there were some front line soldiers among us, with the Knight’s Cross. It was only when I saw those prisoners that I understood what concentration camps were.”

Annie: “In our neighbourhood during the war I watched them take men and women away, children too. But I didn’t really understand what was going on or where they were taking them. Nowadays people say everyone knew what was happening, but they didn’t.”

Karl: “I didn’t meet Annie’s father till long after the war, when we could travel freely again. He picked us up at the station in Rotterdam. ‘Here,’ he said,

grabbing my biggest suitcase. ‘I’ll carry that.’ ‘No, no!’ I said. ‘That one’s far too heavy. Take this smaller one.’ We chatted easily right from the start. He never said anything unpleasant to me.”

Annie: “My father didn’t hold it against me that I’d married a German. But he never visited Germany. Mother used to come for several weeks every year. Father was always too frightened.”

Karl: “Not only of the Germans but of the traffic, the train...”

Annie: “No! It was the country he was afraid of. The Germans. He stayed behind in Rotterdam when Mother came, even though he was helpless without her around to put his shirts ready and butter his bread. I never talked to him about it, but I could tell he was afraid.”

Karl: “Annie’s father only ever talked about his performances, about music. We never discussed the war.”

Annie: “All I know is what my mother told me. She hardly ever talked about it either and I never asked. One time, years after the war, she told me my father hadn’t been ‘on tour’ at all, when he stopped coming home. When it got dangerous for him he was taken in by the St. Franciscus Hospital on the Schiekade. He stayed there a very long time. ‘What was wrong with him, then?’ I asked. ‘Nothing,’ mother said. ‘He only got into bed if there was a raid. The nurses would warn him and suddenly he’d be a deathly ill patient.’ He was always rather pale and thin, so he could easily pass for a very sick man. Mother visited him there, but she never took me with her. Annie’s still a child, she thought, and children talk. You couldn’t trust anyone. Anyhow, I had a German boyfriend.

“My mother didn’t see it as a tragedy that her daughter was going out with a German while her husband was lying in hospital to escape them and later had to go into hiding elsewhere. No, I really don’t think she did. But it must have been extremely hard for her, I see that now. It didn’t even occur to me then. But mother was always sweet to me. She loved me very much. She was happy that I’d found a man to love.

“She told me that in the hospital my father was struggling to cope with the fact that his own father had been taken away... His mother had been dead for some time. No one ever told me that his father, my granddad, had been taken off to a camp even before I met Karl. I didn’t see him in the final years of the war, but we’d never had much contact with my grandparents on that side of the family. Father always kept up appearances for my sake. His grief – which he must have felt – was hidden from me. In the end it occurred to me that he must have decided his child needn’t know about any of that. Granddad performed as a comic before the war and he was very good. I don’t know where he died. I don’t wish to know.

“Here in Germany, none of the family knows that my father was Jewish. I still can’t bring myself to tell them. I’m afraid of what they might think. Rudi, my second son – an absolute darling – is the only one who knows. I wanted to tell Karl-Heinz when he got married, but his father-in-law was a Nazi and Karl-Heinz spends a lot of time with him. Imagine if the old man was to find out! How would we handle that at family gatherings? Whenever I see the old Nazi, at birthday parties, I go and sit at the other end of the room. He spent time in the Netherlands too, when he was in the SS, and he still boasts about all the girls he had there. When he’s been drinking he tells us all the things he got up to. I can’t bear it. I always leave.

“I refuse to watch television programmes about the war too. As soon as they start showing pictures of concentration camps that’s it, I’m off. I don’t want to look. I can’t. I shut my eyes. But when they show those old UFA films I just have to watch. People die in those films sometimes too, but they’re actors and they get up again.”