

History Lesson

As a child my mom was forced to go to Catholic boarding school and promised herself that her children would never had to experience that. Then her oldest daughter (myself) just turned 13, ready for Middle School and insisted on going to boarding school. With pain in her heart, my mom dropped me off for the first time.

Everything was new for me. Being away from home and only going home on the weekends. It was a challenge getting used to a new school and curriculum. The kids spoke a different dialect and I had to make new friends and adjust to the rules of the nuns. Lots for a thirteen year old to handle.

The school bell rang, I was excited for my first history lesson! Eager to learn about the past and what happened in the world before I was born. I would for sure figure out more about my self and what this world was all about. As instructed I carefully opened up my brand new history book to chapter 1 “Child labor in the early 1900’s”. My eyes glanced at the picture, an old factory scene, a row of poor women with very young children on their side, dressed in rags, their skin black from dirt and no smiles on their faces. I could feel from the picture the lack of love those children must have endured.

“Child labour”, the teacher explains “refers to the employment of children in any work that deprives children of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend regular school, and that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful, which was in place in Belgium during the Industrial revolution. Most of them with extremely low wages or not payed at all. There was a law set in 1874 with the intent to stop child labor for children under age 12, but because there was not enough control, nothing much changed”. The more the teacher lectured, the worse I felt.

The school bell rang again, my first history lesson was over. I was left with a deep feeling of sadness and concern for those children and for this world. Is this the world I am born in? Who allowed this child labor to happen and why did the adults not come up for those poor children? Why didn’t anybody do anything about this? More questions about life and this world arose in my mind. From that point on it was clear to me, I did not like that history.

Sharing my personal stories and revealing a bigger picture of life cannot happen if I run from or ignore history and the past, how painful it may be. Life contains it all, the beauty and the beast. We can only create a different and better future if we choose not

to repeat the past and we can only do this if we face what has been and choose this time around to do it differently and with more love and awareness.

An aspect of History I do like are timelines. They give me a perspective, an overview, they motivate me to contemplate the bigger picture.

As a framework for my next episode called “Bookstore Caecilia”, I will provide here a timeline weaving my family and history together.



Nov 18, 1907: My grandfather Emiel Leopold De Clercq was born (my dad’s dad, in picture) called by most “Pol”

May 14, 1910: My grandmother Maria Philomena Jonckheere was born (my dad’s mom, in picture)

1914 - 1918: World War I (now in 2018 in Belgium they are celebrating the 100 year anniversary of the end of WW I)

July 19, 1936: Caecilia De Clercq, first child was born blind.

May 1, 1937: Bookstore Caecilia was opened by my grandparents in Deinze. (First location, Tolpoortstraat next to the Post Office). Every morning at 4 AM, my grandfather

walked with a large cart pushed by hand to the train station to pick up the newspapers and magazines. I remember sometimes going with him, sitting in the cart on his second afternoon pickup round. Pol was a mailman and delivered the mail by bike in neighboring towns. With 3 big bags on his bike, in rain and wind he went his way, mostly to return soaking wet and covered with mud.

Sept 1, 1939: German invasion of Poland. First shots and bombs of WW II were fired. Hitler declares war.

Sept 3, 1939: My dad Hugo De Clercq was born in Deinze, in the bedroom above the bookstore. (Hugo was 2 years old in this picture). That same day England and France declared war on Germany.

1939 - 1945: World War II; Both of my parents fathers served in the Belgian Military during the war. One day the streets of Deinze were bombed. My grandfather was walking on the street, looked up, saw the bombing airplanes and shouted "BASTARDS", not knowing if those were Germans or English plains. Thereupon he was betrayed by the towns people and falsely put on the "black list", those who "sympathized with the Germans". He was taken to prison and the facade of the bookstore was covered with swastikas in black tar which was extremely hard to remove. Their deliveries of newspapers and magazines was also taken away. My grandmother herself drove then by bike to Tielt, a town 10 miles away to buy daily newspapers at retail prices in order to not lose regular customers. Thanks to the intercession of certain publishers, she got her regular delivery of newspapers and magazines back.

My grandfather who was imprisoned was able with the help of a little mirror to see the playground of the school my father attended his first year in preschool. He spend hours hoping to see a glimpse of his son at playtime. He was later transported to a prison in Germany and lived in harsh conditions and to survive searched for food in the trashcans. Later, because of good behavior he was allowed to help a German farmer and had it much better.

Jan 1 1940: My mom, Anny De Clercq is born in Machelen. (Where she still lives)

May 10, 1940 - The German army attacks Belgium. The Belgian army tried to stand as long as possible against the German superiority, but could only cover the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force via Dunkirk. After 18 days the Belgian army surrendered.

May 28 1940: The Belgian military surrendered to the Germans, beginning an occupation that would endure until 1944.

July 1940: My 5 month old mom, her mom, my moms grandparents and 2 uncles fled with their car to Bretagne in France.

1941: Bookstore was moved to larger location on the same street, Tolpoortstraat 91. (Where I spend my child and teenage years in the 70's and 80's).

1945: End of WW II. German military forces were pushed out of Belgium completely by February 1945.

I like to end this episode with a poem written by my dad

1940 - By Hugo De Clercq

The De Clercq family is panicking.
The second world war turned the whole country upside down.
The children are still too small to suffer consciously.
Caecilia is four, talks well but is not walking yet.
Hugo is eight months old.

The newspaper delivery of Pol goes to Vinkt and surrounding towns.
The beautiful month of May is a disaster month.

Germans are taken a few civilians and soldiers hostage in the church.
There is shooting going on and many more people from the community are being driven into the church.
Several family members among them.

A German machine gun mows down the defenseless civilians in the church.
Also family members are victims.

Maria is with her children, a camouflaged shelter in the backyard is dug to flee in case of bombing.
The population is fleeing to France.
People with a car leave first.
Also The De Clercq family decides to flee.

A cart pulled by dog Bello is being loaded with blankets for clothes, food supplies, some loose change and a few paper bills from the bookstore.
Maria has hidden the most expensive things from her store in the hiding space, leather church books, rosaries, and expensive pens.

The children are put on top of the cart.
Grandmother Celina on foot, followed by her daughter Alice and Maria.

The refugee caravan is a misery of weeping and worried women and older men.

The group De Clercq reaches Zomergem (16miles from home) but hears that they will not be able to cross the border.

Totally discouraged they return home.

Despite the thousand of prayers, asking God for help and support, they arrived home to find their underground refugee space bombed and all their belongings, church books and more valuables destroyed.

The clothes and blankets on the dog cart are soaked because Little Cecilia was not potty trained yet.

The high tower of the Saint Martinuskerk is gone.

The store was spared.

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(Sharing is permitted when my name and email is included)

(With a simple email let me know if you like to be added or removed from this list)

Mieke's Voice

Week 1 - Introduction

Week 2 - A Rough Start

Week 3 - Vision

Week 4 - History Lesson