

Ibia of Eket

*Memoirs of a doctor in the tropics*

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Elikser

Ossekop 4

8911 LE Leeuwarden

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+31 (0)58-2894857

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Sjouke Bakker







My boat "IBIA" at the pier of Statia



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## Introduction

This book of short stories was originally intended for my friends and other interested parties as a short summary of my life activities as I best can piece them together in my restful retirement years. I had wished to present a copy to each member of my family, but all of them have said goodbye to this timely life. There is only one cousin left and she lives in Florida. The comments of those friends and acquaintances, whether positive or negative, greatly influenced my decision to put together and publish these stories.

My experience with this experiment turned out rather well as most friends and acquaintances indeed responded positively and seemed to appreciate the nature and breadth of these stories. A good number of the readers provided comments that have been very useful to me in putting the stories together in a good sequence. I have asked for the opinion of others because experience has taught me that any interest in other people's stories (verbal or written) is usually short-lived. One is often more interested in one's own doings, experiences and fortunes than those of others. That is understandable and I do not blame anybody for that aspect of human nature. Yet my interest initially focused mainly on those who have clearly demonstrated their empathy with my stories and shown more depth than just superficial chatter, exchanging pleasantries and then proceeding to the usual activities of daily life. Fortunately, there are still enough people on this earth that would be receptive to one's life and other stories in spite of their understandable focus on their own daily activities.

What you see before you in this memoirs are my personal life stories. The stories are arranged in chronological order to bet-

ter reflect the changes in my life experiences as I progressed from childhood to adulthood. I begin with my early childhood and study years that reflect the most memorable experiences of my youth. The most significant occurrences in this period are the Second World War and my studies as a student. My experiences in this phase played an important role in my later development and ultimate career choice as a physician focusing on how best to make even a small difference in the lives of the people I would later encounter in specific places around the world. My life as a general physician mostly began in 1964 when I started serving as physician on the Island of St. Eustatius in the Dutch West Indies. I have presented two stories about my experiences on this island. During the short period of four months I had a great time and it left with me a strong and dignified impression of the island. My stay in St. Eustatius was my first in the tropics where the weather, culture, and life styles are very different from what I had experienced in Holland, the land of my birth.

I have devoted several chapters to stories about the adventures in my early years in Africa, followed by chapters describing the most emotional moments in my days in Nigeria during the Nigeria/Biafra war that lasted three years (1967-1970). In 1970 I participated in two missions of the International Red Cross first in Amazonas, Brazil and later in Jordan / Lebanon. In these stories I have tried to present my impressions as they reflect the very nature and cultural practices of the people I encountered. The specific case of Amazonas inhabited by the Indians, was fascinating indeed. From 1971 to 1982 I ran a mission hospital in Eket, in south eastern Nigeria. The next twelve stories are of events that took place there. As I look back on the events I describe in this book I cannot help regarding these eleven years as some of the very best of my life, I enjoyed them very much. This book is titled "Ibia of Eket", in

reference to the chieftaincy title that was bestowed upon me when I left the Eket community and my hospital. It was at the same time of my farewell to Africa, where I had spent a total of 17 years providing medical services to people in places of various types. The presentation of a chieftaincy title would be a great honour to anyone but particularly so for an expatriate like me based solely on gratitude for my contribution to the welfare of the community I served. The official ceremony in which I was given this title and the farewells were terrific festivities, which I greatly appreciated.

After leaving Nigeria, I returned to St. Eustatius in 1983 to again provide services as a general physician. I have written about some events in this period to reflect my experiences as a doctor on a quiet, small island with a relatively slow life pace and what for me have been a lot of interesting mini-adventures. Highlights, such as the visit of Her Majesty the Queen and other events that would be common in a small, rustic community, are reviewed.

I was directly involved in the events described in most of these stories and have tried to faithfully present the activities as accurately as possible but have occasionally allowed myself a few poetic licenses in a few instances but the stories are of actual events. Some have an emotional value for me; others were merely written as an observation of what one can go through in every day life, sometimes interspersed with a touch of humour. It is not my intention to hurt anyone's feelings from these stories. I have occasionally used actual names or just initials, but no names or locations are fictitious. If anyone will be offended by the content then I do apologize in advance.

I have in later years realized that many stories about life in African are mostly connected with death and dying. I have,

as you might imagine, no particularly necrological interests. I have often been intrigued by the differences in how different African societies handle the death and dying process and how we Westerners handle it. Naturally, I came in constant contact with death because of my job. This was especially true during the Biafra war of much widespread death and destruction. The phenomenon of death in Africa is closely interwoven with the common activities of daily life. It totally belongs to and is a part of normal existence in most places and is generally regarded as an inevitable event for everyone. Death is not hidden away; it allows for an eye-to-eye confrontation with reality and is accepted as the ultimate outcome of life on earth. The general African belief is that death belongs to life itself. I was very impressed with how this basic belief sometimes allows the living to handle the dying process without undue fear or sadness. This is particularly true in areas where there is common belief that the dead remain aware of the activities of the living.

My intention has been to put on paper the events that I have personally experienced and hope the reader will enjoy reading these true stories.

I want to thank my friend Anna Hofstee, who read all the stories. I am grateful for her many useful suggestions. I am also indebted to Robert Jan van Oosten, who carefully edited the first publication of these stories for my friends.

Last but not least I am very grateful to my oldest "son" Obed Odoemelam for the editing of the English version of the book.

## 1945

It was spring 1945 and I was twelve years old. The schools had long closed because of the war. My parents had hired one teacher in the elementary school to give me private lessons. I went every day to his home or to the school for my lessons in mathematics and the Dutch and French languages. The reason for the latter has remained a mystery to me until today; maybe the teacher was a Francophile. In any case, he was definitely a paedophile.

After the lessons at school, where nobody else was present, he gave me gymnastic exercises and explaining the anatomy of the human body “au naturel” to me, using my body for that purpose. My parents paid the man in kind for the lessons with butter, milk and meat; maybe he thought that they had to be compensated in the same way.

I got soon tired of his overtures and showed that clearly. He was probably afraid that I would inform my parents. The lessons were continued at his home and he turned into an amorphous chagrin. He only forced a smile on his face when I arrived for my lessons with a nice juicy piece of fresh meat from the farm. He then could relax and pinch it before tasting the flavours, which gave him twice a lustful enjoyment. As one can see from this, it were not only the Catholic priests who manipulated young boys, the Protestants having their sexual aberrations too!



*Innocence on clogs*

That same spring my father drove a horse and wagon loaded with potatoes for our family through the streets of Anjum. The slightly sloping road was wet and muddy. My older sister rode her bike a few meters in front of the cart and slipped and fell on the slippery road. The horse jumped over her and my father was fortunately still in a position to manoeuvre the shaft of the cart to the left. However, he could not keep the right front wheel from running over her leg.

The result was a broken lower leg. The doctor was called and had her transported in a rickety ambulance to the Diakonessen Hospital in Leeuwarden. It was there that I went to see her later. There was no public transport, so we were forced to cover the distance of about 35 kilometres from Kollum to Leeuwarden on the bicycle.

The first impression that I had of the big city has not been easy for me to forget. The Germans had shot a civilian, somewhere in the vicinity of the hospital. The corpse was lying in the street, silent and deserted. We passed this scene at maybe a distance of fifty meters. The horrors of war did not fully penetrate to my mind at the time. On the farm one heard of the war, but I had never experienced it that up-close. Watching this horrific incident in the street and for the first time observing a large ward in the hospital, where my sister was a patient and was nursed together with wounded civilians and victims of strafing on the roads, served as a real wake-up call to the horrors and other facts of war. Did the idea of a career as a doctor arise in my mind from this early experience with the consequences of war? My sister always claimed that and often said to me: “You had no interest in your sister’s injury, you were merely intrigued by the hospital ambience and just observed the doctors and nurses”. Who knows! It was about two years later that I told my father that I wanted to become a doctor when I grew up.



*First standing on the left: My father with his resistance comrades during the liberation days in April 1945*

My father feared that heavy fighting would break out as Leeuwarden was being freed. He decided therefore to get my sister out of the hospital and bring her home. On the farm, she would be safe.

This was no easy task as a carrier cycle was necessary for that purpose. We were able to borrow one from the scrap metal dealer. Then an aunt from Groningen who was a nurse had to be called in to accompany my father in her uniform. My sister was thus transported on the tricycle from Leeuwarden to the relative safety of our farm. That meant that my father and aunt had to cover 70 kilometres (to and fro) on tricycle and bicycle with bad tires made out of car tires. It was very tiring and not without danger to their lives. The Germans were in strict control of the roads and the main road to Leeuwarden was daily strafed by British Air Force planes. It was quite an undertaking that fortunately was carried out without incident.

It turned out that Leeuwarden was later liberated almost without any fighting as the Germans surrendered without resistance. How different was the war scenery around the farm.

In that same spring, the hearts of the Frisians were beating expectantly about what was going to happen in the next phase of the war in the area. It indeed was not long before liberation was achieved. The BBC signal of April '45 finally came in the form of the code: "The bottle is empty." Whoever came up with that code must certainly have been an alcohol lover since a reference to an empty bottle usually implies a call for action. This code was the signal for the internal forces in Friesland to begin obstructing and sabotaging the Germans in their war effort.

It was very busy on our farm from the fourteenth to the fif-



teenth of April as the BS'ers (Resistance Forces) began to gather in the barn and front living quarters of the farm. I was usually sent to bed at my normal bedtime. That place of sleep was the bedstead in the kitchen from where I could fully observe the ongoing activities through the cracks on the doors.



*The farm at Kollumer Oud Zijl*

This was a period of busy meetings as plans were being made to attack the German fort about two kilometres away. The plan was for the fighters to approach this German stronghold from two different sides. I could hear every word and was very impressed with the Bren guns (light machine guns) they were carrying. After they left I was unable to sleep because of the tension from what I had seen and heard before. It made me worry about my father whom I had seen the same evening in the kitchen with a firearm and who obviously was going to play a role in that surprise attack. As a Calvinistic educated boy, I would frantically pray that nothing happen to him and that they would kill the Krauts instead.

The next morning all the underground forces returned to

the farm, my father included. Unfortunately, the attack had failed. The Germans had heard them approaching the fort and started shooting. With the plan's failure they had to withdraw. Only one of the resistance fighters was slightly injured. It was a terrible disappointment, but that feeling did not last long, because from the direction of Groningen came an army vehicle with a number of heavily armed Germans driving fast towards the farm. The Frisian resistance fighters started firing at them from the area behind the farm causing the car to stop. Two of the Germans were killed while a third was wounded and was detained as a prisoner in the barn. Then approached a luxury car, which was also forced to stop. The driver and someone who later was recognized as a big shot of the NSB (national socialistic movement) surrendered. The car belonged to a bigwig named Ross, the commander of the German army in Friesland.

The car was full of brandy, chocolate, cigarettes, cigars and many other delicacies and was parked in our barn. There was also an amount of Nfl 600,000 - of new banknotes found in the car that were later handed over to the authorities in the village. The Frisian fighters had at the end of a tiring day the time of their lives in the barn eating chocolate, which they had not tasted for years and smoked the finest cigars while sipping brandy. One of them apparently was frivolously playing with his gun and the result was a loud bang that scared everyone. The bullet found its way through the thatched roof of the barn, fortunately without casualties.

During these continuous skirmishes around the farm it became rather dangerous for its occupants, because several German cars often came towards us firing bullets that whistled past our ears. My sister with her plaster-cast leg was not very mobile. It was thus decided about ten o'clock in the

morning of the 15th April that the family should move to the neighbour's home that was located lower and further from the road than ours. While there, we spent most of the day in the cellar. My sister's resting location was transferred to the bedstead just above us in the cellar and from there she could watch the occasional fighting and report the various actions to us in the basement. At the end of the afternoon it was rather quiet and we thought that the greatest dangers had passed, but of course we could never really be sure. I took the risk to quickly go outside to investigate what was going on in the vicinity of the farm, much to the dismay of my mother and sister. During my snooping around the farm, I discovered two dead Germans behind the dike near the farm. I was quite frightened to see the white faces of the corpses with their mouths half open. I got goose pimples and hesitated for a moment as I wondered whether or not they really were dead. It really was a horrifying experience for me. Obviously, I had to tell those in the basement about my discovery of the dead Germans. My action was not appreciated in the least. "What in the world made you do that", was the common question of disapproval.

Back at the farm we found bullet holes in the bedstead doors and in the upper part of the cabinet. The dogs and cats came out only after a long time of hiding. They seemed first timid, as if they were wondering what all the fuss was about.

We in Friesland were liberated during the second and third week of April. Actually, the Frisian resistance fighters largely liberated Friesland by themselves but with the help of French paratroopers who landed in Appelscha. Only then did the Canadians arrive and help clean up a number of pockets with German soldiers.

Seeing the tanks with the Canadian soldiers as they rolled into the villages was for me a great climax. We were allowed

to ride on the tanks and I made friends among the soldiers, who camped in their tents at a farm close to us in the polder. I went hunting with one of them in the polder and can still remember the excitement and sense of adventure. He did the hunting with his military firearm even when the animal was a small one like a hare. In that case, the poor hare was almost a total loss from damage by the large bullet from the military firearm used. In the camp I ate the same food as the soldiers from a mess tin, which was white beans in tomato sauce. I had never eaten that before. We got plenty of chocolate bars, which were not available during the war. It was for me a wonderful time with a royal feeling.

The next scenes were of the liberation celebrations. Each village organized its own parties and attractions. In the Pomp (Kollumerpomp) for example they played a game in which a pig was rubbed with green soap with the men, including the pastor of the village, invited to try catching it with bare hands. It was a big liberation party indeed. The person, who caught the pig, became the owner. The Society for the Protection of Animals, if it had existed at the time, would probably have been rather unhappy.

In other villages celebrants organized parades with floats and folk festivals. Everyone was excited and really happy that the hated war would finally belong to the past. There were bonfires and organized dances everywhere with the liberators as people went crazy with excitement. It was a wonderful time indeed! Some Frisian girls were even left with a child from some of the celebratory liberators.

It was several months after the end of the war that immigrant Dutch families in America were able to send packages with treats and especially clothes. I remember how happy