

HALLO! Greetings from St. Paul

Mariannahill

in the Netherlands

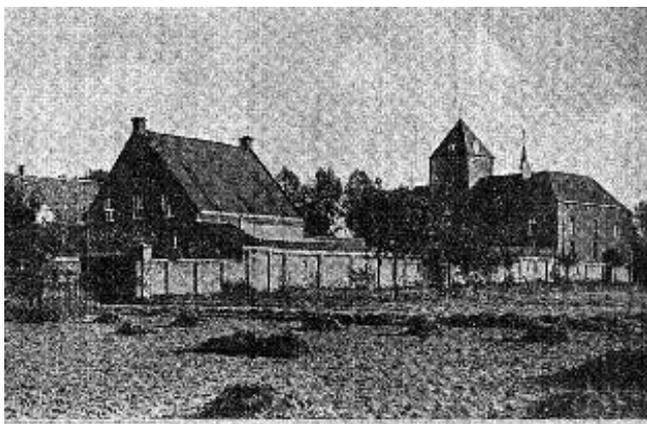
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THE LAST YEAR OF WORLD WAR II 1944-45

The adventures of the Mariannahill communities in Blitterswijck and St. Paul were quite dramatic in the last 10 months of WW II. In this newsletter, the second part of the story of Fr. Winfried Hastreiter CMM (Mariannahill Missions calendar 1947) is summarized with additional information from a war diary of Fr. Liberatus van Velzen. Some senior Mariannahillers will remember this dark period of 70 years ago.

Autumn 1944 - Blitterswijck near the frontline

When the British troops had moved into Venray, a township 8 km away, Blitterswijck came within reach of the British artillery. It was the beginning of October 1944. The CMM community was forced to move into the cellars of the castle. The students of the minor-seminary had not yet returned from the summer holidays to at the beginning of the school year in September.



Former castle of Blitterswijck

The vaults of the cellars of this ancient building of the 12th century with 170 cm thick walls were dark. There was only one window in one of the cellars. The cave dwellers gathered around this only font of light to get fresh air by turns. Another cellar was reserved for five sisters of the Precious Blood with 20 postulants from their mission house in the neighbouring village of Tienray. A family with four children lived in another cellar. Furthermore, there were 20 young men hiding in the lowest cellar in order to stay out of sight during the raids which captured men for forced labour in Germany.



At that time, Fr. Leo Poser was the superior of the community of about 20 Mariannahillers and 2 Dominican refugees from Venlo.

There were also some German soldiers staying in one of the side buildings. One day a vehicle loaded with ammunition was parked near this building when it exploded, killing two soldiers. Grenades were flying back and forth between both sides of the fronts. For six weeks, the Mariannahill community lived this catacomb life in the castle until they were afflicted by major troubles.

The Mariannahillers detained

Suddenly, on 17 November 1944, soldiers appeared at the castle and commanded the Mariannahillers to leave the building. The CPS Sisters and other women were allowed to stay. The soldiers searched the whole castle; however, they did not discover the 20 hidden men. A heavy cupboard was moved to the entrance of their cellar to camouflage the door. The men were given 5 minutes to get a blanket and some food. Then they were marched to the village and added to a large group of men raided from other neighbouring villages. The group of some 600 men had to cross the Maas and walk to Velden, 12 km away. The Mariannahillers sang the popular hit, 'Houd er de moed maar in' (*Keep your spirits up*) and other local folk songs.

In the mean time, Fr. Leo Poser had succeeded to be released because of a medical certificate in his passport. All captives were transported on tenders of the tramline Nijmegen/Venlo. Because of lack of a locomotive, a tractor towed the tram to Venlo. There they had to board a train of cattle wagons without seats or straw, heading for Germany. Standing upright, they travelled towards Wuppertal during the cold night. The train was attacked twice by British fighter planes which caused great terror and confusion. Seven passengers were killed and many were wounded.

After arrival in Wuppertal, the detained were taken to a transit camp. The transport leader introduced the men to the camp commander and, surprisingly he highly commended the religious for their heroic action, after the attack, at the risk of their own lives, they had taken care care of the wounded and had covered the dead with their own blankets. He

requested that they were treated well. And indeed, they were looked after reasonably. The Mariannahill-ers were accommodated in two small rooms that had straw and a small stove. They were allowed to celebrate Mass and to get what they needed for it from the parish church in Sonnborn. After having been taken to another camp, they could celebrate Mass in a church in town. They also could move more freely and were even allowed to find their own accommodation in town. They contacted the Holy Spirit Sisters from Steyl in the hospital who warmly welcomed them and took care of them very well, giving them accommodation, clothing and food. Compared to the other detained they were privileged.

In spite of repeated attempts, the labour officers at Düsseldorf could not force the Dutch into labour. Therefore, they passed them on to the Gestapo (Secret Police), who nonetheless were unable to settle things with the stubborn Dutchmen. The two representatives of the group, Fathers Eduard Luyten and Remigius Peters, were bold and defiant. Fr. Winfried Hastreiter remarks, 'There stood a higher power behind the detained, to which the power of darkness had to give way'.

In the mean time more religious, SVD, Trappists and Redemptorists) had joined the group. They also took steps to be released. For weeks they were waiting between anxiety and hope. On 20 December, suddenly the message came through: 'Tomorrow, the Dutch religious are allowed to return to the Netherlands'. They would be transported by train to the North of the Netherlands, where they should present themselves to the German occupation authorities. He next day, the SVD fathers and the Trappists joined them at the railway station of Sonnborn, all together 62 persons. They got seats in reserved carriages.

Unfortunately, one confrere, Marcel Noten, was too ill to come along and had to stay back. Fr. Eduard Luyten volunteered to accompany him. He and Fr. Remigius Peters had continuously attempted to be released by the authorities.

Near Oldenzaal, the train crossed the Dutch border. The released decided not to check in with the authorities, but split up in small groups in order to make it easier to find accommodation and not be caught in a raid. The confreres from the northwest of the country parted from the others and tried to find a way home. Another group, together with those from the southern provinces, found a place with the Dominicans in Zwolle, and the others went to the northern provinces Groningen or Friesland.

Dramatic developments at St. Paul

St. Paul becomes headquarters

One day, St. Paul became suddenly a very important place. It was chosen as the headquarters of General Marshal Model, the supreme commander of the West-Army in the Netherlands. It was the begin



*Three students (Lenssen, Duijkers, Dupont) on the ruins of the minor seminary in Blitterswijk 1945
(Photo Fr. Leo Poser)*

ning of a period of highest activities; cars with high ranking officers rushed back and forth; all around heavily armed sentries were posted, patrolling up and down; a network of communication cables was installed going in all kind of directions. It was said that those top man were not only busy with meetings and administration but also with drinking parties. They seemed to have excellent French wines in stock. Soldiers whispered that one night even Heinrich Himmler, the feared SS-Reichsführer had called in for deliberations but also for a hefty drinking party. A former CMM seminarian was working in one of the offices. Fr. Hermann Arndt was happy to see his former student again. He attended Mass almost daily.

Suddenly, after three weeks, the headquarters broke up, suddenly. While the front was approaching, the soil became too hot under their feet.

St. Paul becomes a fortress

The high four-story building of St. Paul was of course of strategic importance because it offered a wide outlook over the whole area. Therefore, it became a fortified place in face of the approaching front. All around, large underground bunkers were built, some furnished as living quarters. Br. Possenti, the electrician, had to install electric cables. The riv-

erbanks of the Maas were secured with barbed wire, minesfields, machineguns and trenches. About 800 forced labourers arrived from Germany to construct them. When the British soldiers came very close on the far site of the river, these workers were withdrawn and 250 men of the Polish Labour Service took their place.

St. Paul becomes a Red Cross clinic

On 15 October 1944 a new formation arrived to occupy part of the house. St. Paul, became a Red Cross clinic with surgery rooms and seven doctors and medical personnel. An enormous canvas with the Red Cross sign was spread out on the soccer field to serve as a temporary protection against attacks from the air. The wounded victims came from small first-aid posts at the front. In the family house of Fr. Frans Lenssen (15 km away), such an aid post was set up in one room. Soldiers in various conditions arrived there daily from the battlefield, and after having been treated, were transported to St Paul. Thirty-three of the soldiers who died there were buried in the cemetery of the mission house.

St. Paul under artillery fire

On 23 November 1944, the battlefield had moved to the other bank of the River Maas, opposite St. Paul. The British artillery bombarded the German positions near the house daily. The first grenades exploded in the near surroundings of St. Paul. This went on from that day until the arrival of the British troupes. Immediately after the first attack, all inhabitants of S. Paul went underground into the cellars of the main building, the farm and the workshops and other buildings of the 'old St. Paul'. Kitchen, dinigrooms, dormitories were quickly set up in the cellars. In those days, the number of refugees from outside was growing daily, so that a chapel was prepared for 300 persons. The Sisters of 'Nazareth' were still there with their 183 girls. The Brothers of the neighbouring St. Joseph's school had come with 40 boys.

On 10 December the British opened for the first time fire with their canons directly on the house. This went on for days.

Evacuation

On 9 January 1945 came the long dreaded order for the evacuation of St. Paul. At 12.00, the whole building had to be vacated. The claim that according to a well kept charter, St. Paul was protected under the Convent of Genève, had resulted in only a few days of postponement, but could not hold up the

evacuation.

On 15 January, in cold weather with frost and snow, the caravan of 600 refugees including those from Arcen who had joined in, started walking and crossed the border near Walbeck. It was misty so that they had not to worry about attacks from the air. From Walbeck they continued walking 7 more kilometres to Straelen. There, at the railway station, a long train with 50 carriages was waiting. In the mean time, 600 more refugees had arrived from Venlo, so that the number increased to 1200 people.

At midnight the train left Straelen for Groningen near the Nord Sea. Since the allied forces had already reached Nijmegen, the train had to make a detour through German territory. On 16 January, it crossed the Dutch border near Winterswijk. In Vorden there was a break after 12 hours traveling.

The villagers prepared food for the refugees, potatoes, and milk for the children. Then the train drove to Zwolle, where they met three CMM conferees from Blitterswijk who had come there some weeks earlier and had found refuge in the Dominican monastery. Frater Chrysanthus van den Idsert was present at the railway station where he was working with the Red Cross. At the station, fighter planes appeared suddenly but they did not an attack.

On 17 January, the train finally arrived in Groningen, a town of 120.000 inhabitants at that time, about 30 km from the Nord Sea. The four religious groups stayed in the city for the first days: the Mariannahillers, the Sisters of Nazareth with 183 children, the Brothers of the Seven Sorrows with 40 boys, and a group of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Most of the Mariannahillers were accommodated in Kloosterburen, a village on the coast.

Battle of Groningen

While most parts of the southern provinces were already liberated in autumn 1944, the occupation in the provinces north of the great rivers was prolonged until May 1945. People in the great cities suffered famine. The city of Groningen would still become the scene of a fierce battle in the final phase of the war. From 14 April on, artillery could be heard. Canadian troops forced the German army back into town. In the following days, the infantry fought a way into the city and a man-to-man battle started. They had to fight street by street and house by house. Many houses were burning, people were fleeing, shooting and explosions were heard everywhere. Fr. Winfried Hastreiter, who lived in a guesthouse in the centre of the city, was an eyewitness of the battle. At 4.00 a.m., a man of the fire brigade rushed into the house announcing that the street was free; the

first Canadian troops appeared and not for long the remaining German soldiers surrendered. For the inhabitants and the refugees, the war was over..

The end of the war passed almost unnoticed for the Mariannahillers in Kloosterburen. Only a few days later they realized that the battle in Groningen had ended. They only had seen some smoke of the burning city over the horizon.

In the mean time, Br. Hilarius Kummeling had died on 14 April 1945 after a long period of suffering from TB. Six days after the liberation of Groningen, all Mariannahillers gathered for his funeral.

Returning home

On 15 May 1945, a long-time house friend of St. Paul appeared unexpectedly in Groningen and announced in few words: 'I have come with a truck from St. Paul to bring all Mariannahillers back home'. Jan van Dijk from Arcen had been a close friend of Mariannahill since the foundation of St. Paul. He was one of the first students when the fathers started a school at St. Paul in 1918. When this school was moved to Germany in 1920, he had not gone along. However, he remained a close friend and a great supporter in many ways. When St. Paul was evacuated, he stayed in Walbeck and kept an eye on the property. When he found out that three boxes with chalices and monstrances from St. Paul, the parish and the Sisters convent in Arcen, were stolen as war booty, he was determined to get them back. He succeeded to get a document from the Swedish consul in Kleve, who also looked after the Dutch affairs during the occupation. He went to Kevelaer to pass this letter to the Gestapo officer who was summoned by the Swedish consul return the stolen religious articles in accordance with Genève Convention. The Gestapo man, respecting the international law, gave in to the demand of the Swedish consul and reluctantly returned the stolen goods.

With the permission of the commander of the British occupation and the mayor of Arcen, Jan van Dijk got the disposal of a truck with driver from the Red Cross to bring back the inhabitants of St. Paul from Groningen. Was via Zwolle, where they picked up three confreres, and from there to Deventer, Zutphen, Arnhem and Nijmegen. Along the way, they saw the devastation of the war everywhere. The next day they arrived at St. Paul and stood in shock at the sight of the destruction. When somebody remarked dryly, 'It could have been worse. We are back home at last', the gloomy mood was lifted. The next day they took stock of the damage and counted 88 direct hits on the buildings, which were also completely looted; furniture, equipment, tools, machines, stoves,

foodstuff like 250 sacks of grain and flower, cattle, horses, chickens, everything had gone.

Live goes on

The community members of the destroyed castle in Blitterswijk came home soon afterwards. The 4 priests and 20 scholastics had been dispersed into all directions.

The new school year started with 41 students in September 1945. Two postulants and three aspirants were admitted.

The superior general, Fr. Reginald Weinmann, who had stayed at the generalate in Hatfield/ Peveral/England during the war, visited St. Paul in September 1945. He erected St. Paul as headquarters of the new Dutch Province and appointed Fr. Remigius Peters provincial.

The world war had begun for the Netherlands with the invasion of foreign troops on 10 May 1940 and ended with their capitulation at Wageningen on 5 May 1945.

Life went on.

Missionaries on home leave

Br. Adriaan Wissenburg from Mariannahill arrive on 17 May and Fr. Alfonso Voorn from Papua New Guinea on 24 May.

Philip Heier, a former missionary in Lae PNG in 1960/70, came from the United States and visited some old friends and co-workers. He is the brother of the three Mariannahillers, Tom, Vergil en Andrew Heier.

King's Day

After over 100 years of queens reigning the Netherlands, since last year, the new head of the kingdom is King Willem-Alexander with Queen Máxima (from Argentina). Therefore, the traditional Queen's Day has given way to King's Day. This day was celebrated with much cheerfulness all over the kingdom and orange coloured activities (the Dutch monarchy belongs to the House of Orange, going back to the 'Father of the Fatherland' William of Orange (1654) the first Dutch ruler after a long Spanish reign). The young royal couple is very popular and was the centre of the celebrations.