A chapter from the book [“The Mastmakers’ Daughters”](http://www.TheMastmakersDaughters.us) by Jack van Ommen.

Christmas 1944 in Dachau[[1]](#footnote-1)

With Christmas approaching, our thoughts went out to our loved ones from whom we had not heard anything for four months. We tried to lift each other’s spirits but that was not an easy task when everyone is preoccupied with the same concerns. Has Holland been liberated? Have any of our family members been harmed in the liberation offensive?

Commander Stirnweis decided that this Christmas would not go by unnoticed under his command. Mrs. Stirnweis had come to visit for Christmas and “Paps”[[2]](#footnote-2) had sent his mistress away for the next few days. But his well-intended plans were almost called off all together.

Paps had managed to procure a large sausage, as a surprise for his wife. But the wurst disappeared from the kitchen. The commander was furious. A search through our quarters turned up nothing. So, in his desperation, he tried the standard method, putting us in formation. There we stood for hours in the cold, in the snow, for a sausage.

No one came forward. He called it off, by then he realized that whoever had stolen the prize had consumed it by now. The preparations for the festivity resumed after this incident. Paps had a Spruce tree cut in the forest and the Christmas tree stood with a few silver stars and candles on the table in the middle of the mess hall.

Frau Stirnweis had brought colored crepe paper with which the Polish women were busy decorating the hall. We smelled the baking of cookies and we were told that we would be served coffee with sugar and cream and a Frankfurter sausage.

A spirited discussion ensued among the women in our block whether we should just ignore the commander’s invitation, particularly after the standing in formation and just out of principle. We polled our neighbors and they shared our resolve. But when we heard the Polish women sing their beautiful Christmas songs, we got suckered into Paps’ program.

One by one, we tripped into the mess hall to check it out.

It did not take long for us to overcome our reluctance after seeing all those delicacies on the festively decorated tables. Paps sat in the center between the tables and the Christmas tree. The candles were lit. He was obviously pleased in his function as host; he encouraged us with a wide grin on his face. We took our places at the tables. Coffee with sugar, milk, a cookie and the sausage were served.

It was starting to feel like Christmas. With some hesitation at first, several of our women started singing “Holy Night Silent Night” followed, with a little more conviction, by “De Herdertjes lagen bij Nachten” and “Oh, Tannebaum”.

As our way of a peace demonstration, we ended our repertoire with extra emphasis on the “Vrede op Aarde” (“Peace on Earth”) refrain from the popular Christmas hymn “Ere zij God”.

To every one’s astonishment, we saw the commander stand up, take his hat off, and join our song in the German version. He kept standing and gave us a speech in which he wished us a safe return to our families. Was this for real?

When we walked back to our barrack one of the women remarked: “He is and will always be a Nazi. He is just in a sentimental mood for Christmas”.

The next day, Christmas day, there was another celebration in the mess hall. The Polish women had put together a Christmas pageant. All the tables had been lined up against the walls, and the benches were lined up as in a theater. The Three Kings and the Shepherds had been dressed in blankets and tinsel.

Mary wore a long black skirt and a white blouse. Joseph was dressed in men’s trousers and a dress shirt. Mary and Joseph’s clothes had been borrowed from Stirnweis. The commander had invited his bosses from the main camp in Dachau. He wanted to make an impression on them how well behaved his subjects were, to show them the contrast to the mess they had to put up with in Dachau.

Two women from our group, Mary Vaders and Riekie Heiligers, mounted the “stage” and sang the popular Dutch tear jerker sea shanty “Ketelbinkie”.

Mary recited one of her many poems she composed and sang for us in English “A Love is So Sweet in the Spring Time”.

The SS men enthusiastically stamped their boots and with shouts of “Bis, Bis!” demanded encores. The Dutch women closed their part of the entertainment by all singing “Waar de blanke top der duinen” and “Ik heb U lief mijn Nederland”, both very melancholic patriotic songs. Several of the Dutch women wore orange crepe paper bows in their hair, made out of the paper brought by Frau Stirnweis. Orange is the Dutch national color.

The small group of Slovenian women could often be heard singing a beautiful melody. The commander assumed that it was their national anthem. He asked the women to sing it for his guests. They were more than happy to oblige. Because this happened to be their Partisan song:

 *“Po šumama i gorama”* ending with:

“*Mi ne damo zemlje naše Da je gaze fašisti”*

which translates to: “We don’t allow our lands to be trampled by Fascists!”

They sang it with gusto!! The visiting officers applauded enthusiastically with “Bravo, Bravo!” It took an enormous effort, for those of us who knew the real meaning, to keep a straight face.

That very night, Mary and Joseph scaled the barbed wire fence in their borrowed civilian disguise, never to be seen again. Stirnweis became enraged. His kindness to lend them his clothes had made him a fool. Their freedom cost us, the following days, many hours of standing in the cold in formation, as a communal punishment.

A small price for us to pay for Mary and Joseph.

1. *Note: This chapter is for the most part a verbatim translation of Kiky Heinsius’ memoirs*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dutch for Pops. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)