My Little War

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An extract

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You write your Little War

You'd rather write a different book – grander, deeper, more beautiful. You'd call it 'these are the curses and prayers of the little man in the face of the big war, these are cantos, this is THE BIBLE OF THE WAR'. The next day you'd like nothing better than to crush your pen underfoot – exhilarating, but the day after you'd have to buy a new one, because you simply have to write, it's a natural urge. One person curses till he gets apoplexy, the other bangs his head against brick walls.

You write your Little War.

Excerpt 1

The book about the war

A little writer writes his little war but what great writer will now rise up and offer us his Book About the Great War – all in capitals? And offer is far too proper a word for such a book. Hurl it in our faces, hurl it at our dismayed consciences would be nearer the truth.

Perhaps you will do it, you who've lost all your worldly goods, as they say, but who as a human being have lost much more, having been evacuated like so much livestock and deported like a criminal, bombed and machine-gunned and toyed with like an empty can kicked about by kids, died a hundred times over mutilated gagged teeth knocked out with a spanner, so that, sitting there like Job with his boils, you... No, sitting there like little Frans Wauters, whose job it was to deliver letters to foreign labourers in Kassel in Germany and during an air raid took cover in a flood drain and who when he came out could no longer see Kassel... If they had slid a chair under my trembling legs, as I sat there I could have surveyed all-that-had- once-been-Kassel... And so sitting there on that chair and looking at what-had-once-been-the-world, you'd be able to write the book that we might not have found the courage to read, or about which we might say: I don't understand it... because we are used to reading words glued together with dead letters, and are only able to appreciate something when, as they say, it has rhythm, and no meaning.

Because you'd write words born of sweat and mud and dying horses in an upturned wagon and blocks of houses torn apart by the blast, and blood. With such words you'd construct sentences like twisted rails that start perfectly normally but a little way along stick up in the air, as if the bombed trains were straining to take off into the sky but when the rails ended crashed back to earth. You'd make sentences like arms extended in pity but stopping halfway because pity's not appropriate here... because if *our* hands don't kill we shall be killed, our books will be burnt and our paintings condemned as worthless art and our finest thoughts regarded as the thoughts of madmen, and all that will be left will be the thoughts of sadists and medieval heretic burners. And your bloody words, strung together into painfully contorted sentences, will form pages like fields strewn with mines and churned up by tanks, like the silent and still faintly smouldering cities of Warsaw Coventry Hamburg Kharkov Rotterdam and the whole of Russia which they tried to kid us was inhabited only by sluts who ate their children and men who charged about with knives between their clenched teeth.

Oh your book would be a book of condensed tears and death lust and *Schweinerei* that don't belong in any book, because people nowadays turn their noses up when even the slightest little f..k defaces these pages, but that in Your Book will be a flaming testimony to the beast that conquered the spirit. Your book, which you only wrote to escape your dumb pain and blind fear and so as not to go mad, will be the mirror the abyss the hell that later generations will come to look at – perhaps on payment of ten cents' admission like at the museum, as there will be profiteers around then too – so as ... oh so as to what? to start all over again perhaps. To say of your book, as they murder and rape and spread lies, that never was such a huge lie written. To excommunicate you from the holy church and put you on the list of banned books and throw you on a new bonfire and whoop round it like Indians. Because I, a little writer, have little enemies who throw mud, but you, great writer, will have great enemies who will desecrate your memory even unto to the seventh generation.

Where is the time when you struggled to pay off the mortgage on your house, sometimes making headway as a day labourer and sometimes scrambling backwards, having to join the dole queue. And one morning, your

wife saying: feel, there's something moving. And straightaway the policeman's there with your call-up papers – and the house that your wife will just have to pay off by herself, and the parcels she sends and the letters she writes, today: I can't feel anything moving now, do you think something's wrong? And the next day: oh thank god, it's turned round again!

Meanwhile you are getting one franc's pay a day and someone steals the butter and the officers are reeling around drunk and war breaks out – just as you are stuck there on the Albert Canal and they are facing you, the grey bastards – and you're left to pick up the pieces. Your child must be starting to walk about now, but you don't know. You don't know if your wife has taxes to pay, yes or no – and besides THE BOMBS ARE FALLING perhaps she's already dead back there

BOOM

that was close!

And to think that the great mass of people on the Albert Canal clung to the crazy notion that these were just large-scale manoeuvres.

Excerpt 2

Red night

Then there was that night when the sirens wailed again and almost out of habit my wife said: you get the little one rightaway and go into the garden, I'll come on after you with a blanket – I reckon she'd say the same in her sleep – that night, oh hold my typewriter tight to stop me getting sentimental...

I pushed them into the hole and threw the blanket over their heads and prepared to die. Just then the first flare was dropped, over there, a long way behind the row of workers' houses, and another look and another. They're marking out the railway line, I said. But was it the railway? There were already red flares above our house and behind it and in front of it, we had a blood-red house and the row of workers' houses was a blood-red row. It had become a toy town. Is it the railway they are marking out? asked my wife, and my son echoing her: is it the railway, Dad? Yes, I said and all the while my heart was in my mouth. And Staf Spies and his wife and Mathilde with her children and the Protestant and the whole of the poor district without cellars came looking for shelter in the basement of the house they were building next to us. Staf Spies, who on other nights smokes and makes comments ('look at that and listen to that'), looked and said nothing. Now he saw and was silent. He held a red cigarette in one red hand and tried to stop his fingers from shaking. I thought we'd had our chips then, something I'd thought before actually, when the plank shot out from underneath me high on the scaffolding and the naphtha lamp exploded in the factory. But that doesn't matter now, I threw myself in the hole put my head under the blanket and heard my son say: and deliver us from evil amen. My wife got annoyed that it was taking so long, why don't they just drop them, she said. Yes that was it drop and die, but we couldn't go on dying all through that red night. I crawled out of the hole and looked round, there was a fire over in the marshalling yards and we hadn't even heard them dropping. The aircraft left and the red tried valiantly to stay red, but a long way in the distance the night had become as it always is, black with twinkling stars. And quiet, so quiet that suddenly, far away, I don't know where, you could hear the bombs falling.

Staf Spies and his wife and Mathilde and the whole neighbourhood who had been with us in the basement, emerged and everyone was gabbling louder than the next person. They're hitting Kortrijk, said Staf Spies who was listening with his head cocked to one side. Where? Asked Mathilde absently though she had heard perfectly well. Kortrijk, he repeated and the whole twinkling night was full of the word Kortrijk. And I thought of Kortrijk, of What's-his-name who had been a prisoner-of-war with me and whom I had written a very crafty letter and who had told me in reply that he was lame and was stuck in a chair with a brace on his legs, and I wondered how he would have got into the hole with that brace on.

When the people who had fled into the fields – and had endured even greater terrors out there, as paratroopers had landed, they whispered – Staf Spies: the world has been spared again for today. Because Staf Spies' world is that row of workers' houses and Kortrijk isn't part of that, it's another world. A long line of lamps with hand generators made its way through the gardens in the red night that had become a black night again. Only a train was still burning over in the marshalling yards.

And in a mass of people rounded up and machine-gunned by the Germans, just one who dropped a second too soon lay for hours among the dead without daring to move – at night when it was dark he crawled out and hid in the cesspool, with only his head sticking out.

And Mrs Lammens who hasn't two pennies left to rub together and says the war will be over next week, has a fight with her husband on Sunday night because of his pipe, which he asks her to knock the ash out of on the step – and Mrs Lammens knocks the ash out and by accident the last bit of tobacco as well, and her husband gets up in a rage and smashes his pipe to bits, and something snaps in Mrs Lammens' head and she drops dead.

And the brother of that cripple from Thrift Street has been to Germany to work and now he comes home with a wife, a German, and that German wife won't let him go back, she says things are bad over there in Germany, the regime and what have you – because all her neighbours in Thrift Street are anti-German.

Excerpt 3

Petrol tank

One evening when we'd been standing at Lazy Corner chattering on and on and had sorted out the war and set up a second front and totally wiped out the Germans in Russia because of the cold, Mon from the viscose factory said: that he'd rather drop down dead than lift a finger to help a German. And Emiel who had TB countered: that those German lads couldn't help it, whichever way you looked at it, but that they simply didn't see things the same way as we did, we're for the king and they're for Hitler. And someone else had chimed in: that we are no more for the king than for anyone else, that we are for ourselves and want nothing except to be left in peace.

So that evening I just sat there looking at the falling dusk and saying to myself, that it was more beautiful every time to see the sun sinking from view behind those demolished houses, and also wondering how long, how long this war would last, and whether I had been put in this world just to keep seeing war again and again, the first one was scarcely over when my father was already saying 'it's going to be war again for you sometime', if I happened not to feel like eating lunch, and after that I was a soldier and after that they were already fighting in Spain, no that madness never passed from the world. I wasn't sure if it was the fault of that poor simple people or of the wall of gold or because there were too many people or too much was produced, or whether it was just the earth itself that was sick, with an attack of the DTs. I was brooding and forgot to reply when Emiel asked me something, and sudden the planes were there without my having seen them. It's German stay where you are. Yes but is that one there German too? They're English for Christ's sake, it's a dog fight, run for it! Just now we were on Lazy Corner and suddenly we were in the middle of the war, just like in the theatre where you're in a room in act one and immediately after in a wood in act two. Somewhere a woman started crying, not because she'd been hit but because in her frenzied fear of death she'd lost her head. All the rest stood and watched. And Padakker who's a saver and a stickler and likes to be certain, was half standing half kneeling, ready to rush into cardboard public shelter, 'in case anything happened'. And all of a sudden something came down, look look, a plane crashing. And the lower it came, the clearer we could see it was a bomb: it's a bomb it's a bomb! And everyone ran and no one knew where they were running to, and in their haste people scooped up a child and then dropped it again because it wasn't 'their' child. And all the women were crying and all the children were crying and Lazy Corner was suddenly deserted. And meanwhile, if it had been a bomb... Oh, it's too stupid for words, but it came spiralling down and it turned out to be just a petrol tank. Ha, ha, how they laughed and slapped their thighs and wiped the tears from their eyes: they're bombing is with petrol tanks now! What a scream: Staf Spies came out with some butcher's wrapping paper and shouted: they're supposed to have dropped beefsteaks, but I can't find the meat.

And Jan Smit who's hard of hearing and stands there cursing that they should drop bombs BOMBS BOMBS BOMBS – let them blow me to smithereens, let them come – and who as he crosses the road just in front of a military vehicle is punched in the face by a German and stands there half dead from fright and looks for a hole in the cobbles to crawl into.

And Piet who's joined the blackshirts because he can no longer make ends meet (and all those who are earning a pretty penny from the Germans refuse to speak to him) and he dare not go to Brussels anymore because he's heard tell that all the blackshirts are being sent to the Eastern front, so then he starts smuggling butter in his uniform – although there's no point, since his wife throws the money away anyway on her lovers, while her kids sleep in the street covered in scabs and lice without a shirt to cover their skinny little bums.

And Lou who sells shoes that he's pinched at work to someone who sells him coal that he has pinched on the railways – and whenever they see the slightest thing they start bawling at the top of their voice: bloody THIEVING BASTARD.

Excerpt 4

In praise of the Boswell Sisters

In those miserable days, I only had to take a step towards the radio and my wife would say: is this really a time to be listening to music? And I would answer: it's the Boswell Sisters, as if they were more than music. Because this is a hymn to the Boswell Sisters. If I were great poet I might sing the praises of Bach and Beethoven whom people tell me about and in whom they hear the sea and the forests and God, but who just remind me of Gust Nest's sawmill. And if I were an even greater poet I would sing the praises of jazz, the soul of our ruined age, of our desperation and rage and despair – of our age in which none of us, individually, feel at home, but which no other generation but ours could endure, o Armstrong with your trumpet. But I'm not a great poet, all I can do is say a few things about our street and so I'm only famous in our street, while the Boswell Sisters are famous all over the world. And in those miserable days when I went over to the radio to push aside the tweet-tweeting of the interference with my ears and listen to you, o Boswell Sisters, I was almost grateful that I live in this age. I heard your songs through the interference and I don't know how to describe it, whether one should first print a song like that and then tweetweetweet on top. And then once the Gestapo came in just when you were singing and they couldn't hear, they asked for my papers and left again, and I turned rather pale when they'd gone and thought: I'll write a novel about this one day. But now I find it so uninteresting that couldn't manage to write three lines about it, whereas I could write 300,000 about you. And then afterwards, when we were breathing more easily and were listing to the Free Dutch station from England, I heard you again without interference, o beloved Boswell Sisters who mean more to me than Bach or Beethoven. And, I should tell you something that no one must hear, but how can I ? I must write it in a book you will never read, but which I hope that you may... who knows... And do you know what, I'll write it very fast and then cover it with my hands so that no one but you can read it: I heard, something faraway vibrated in me, and my wife asked: why are your eyes so wet?

And the touching case of the three old men who are sitting chatting, and one old man asks: what fun is there left for them nowadays? And the other two sit there nodding and for all we know perhaps not even believing him.

And I wonder what constitutes 'fun' in an old man's head.

Excerpt 5

Letter about Lea Lûbka

Dear friend you may remember Lea Lûbka, the Jewish girl that we used to call Liesje during the war, and who will never have any other name for me because it's her honorary name, and who always sat knitting so quietly – I don't know what, and probably she had even less idea – in the hours when she had no underground newspapers to deliver and had to take a case of explosives through town, and who once every couple of weeks would open her mouth and let thoughts unfold, so deep and beautiful that you would look in vain for them in the great philosophers. I painted her once as she sat there like an 'emigrant' with her parcel on her knees and with her child's eyes looking right through the parcel at the next thought that was ripening in her, and which she might let out of her mouth in the next couple of weeks. But again it wasn't right, that painting, like your writing isn't right – try and remember one of those nights when were still honest and naïve and sat under the iron bridge looking at the reflection of the yellow lights in the black water, and said: I shall never paint and I shall never write anything except what is deep and beautiful and true. And now you write jokes and I paint Mickey Mouse designs on fairground tents. But Liesje never uttered that last beautiful thought, unless it was over in Germany perhaps where she was deported. And yesterday I get home and turn the radio on without listening to it as you do, and suddenly I hear her name being read out: Lea Lûbka is returning alive and well from Mauthausen camp. And I wander round between my four walls and say to the failed painting in which she sits looking at her parcel and at the cracked cup that she has drunk out of, and at the wobbly chair on which she has sat knitting something that must have been much more than just a pair of socks (perhaps what we all longed for in those days, and the distant reflection of which I still sometimes try to find in your eyes, fool that I am) and at all of that I shouted: she's coming back she's coming back! And I walked round the streets and said to the sky and the trees in the boulevard and to the people hawking black-market cigarettes-Anglaises!: she's coming back! I shouted it, screamed it, whispered it. I called by at Piet's place – and Piet's brother was there too, so that it saved me a walk since I'd planned to go round to his too – but then I looked up Leo anyway, although Leo never knew her that well, but that wasn't the point, the point was that I could say it everywhere. Everywhere. LEA LÛBKA IS COMING BACK.

And this morning a letter from Sweden saying that Lea Lûbka died out there: we, her friends, did everything we could in her last moments to alleviate her suffering (o Liesje, Liesje) we pooled our wedding rings and gold fillings to buy an egg, we stole and saved food to save her life because her camp had been punished, and for weeks they had been forced to work up to their waists in water – exhausted by pneumonia she fell ill and when we had got her through the eye of the needle she was punished *again* and had to stand to attention on the parade ground for hours, and now she's dead.

Lea Lûbka is dead now, and I came back home and the radio is on and they are still reading out her name: Lea Lûbka, alive and well, is returning from Mauthausen concentration camp. Your friend the painter.

And the story of Nico Rost, with his cloth over his head to cover his sores, about Dachau, where they pushed along a corpse, with a mug in its hand, as part of the queue, to get a little more soup.

And the corpse that because of this also had to be on parade.

And no one knew anything about the Resistance during the war, and four days after the liberation, everyone is saying to you: I was in the Resistance. And now they're already saying: I'm glad I was never in the Resistance, because they were a bunch of bloody Communists.

And my father says: we stuck a membership card for the Resistance in the shop window and we get scarcely any customers anymore – and we threw someone out of the association of master painters because he was in the Gestapo, and now the Gestapo man has already got a coupon for glass, and none of the painters who belong to the association have got coupons yet.

Last cry:

KICK THEM HARD

TILL THEY GET A CONSCIENCE

Excerpt 6

Fifteen years later

And fifteen years later I'm crossing the station square with all kinds of bees in my bonnet and I almost bump into her. It's just that something, I don't know what, makes me look at that bitter smile. And I immediately drown in her eyes again. The years fall away. I see her again as she used to be, a child, our home help...

They were very hard up in her house in those days and after school she came to help my wife with all kinds of things. The help consisted mainly of breaking plates, getting sewing thread into a tangle and unpicking wrongly stitched patches of cloth. She was still skinny then, her legs slightly too long, like an Easter lamb. But the most beautiful thing about her was her little face, a working-class girl with a crease of hunger round her mouth and eyes – things were at their worst then – together with a touch of refinement given her by God knows who. I was desperately in love with her. If I had still been a boy I would have sung her praises in verses, as it was I painted her on hopelessly coarse wartime canvas. She would be sitting unpicking linen again, for hours, and meanwhile she would upset my wife with all kinds of questions. My wife was a product of the years when the world believed all kinds of things, she joined associations and leagues, and was filled with an unshakeable sense that one day it would all change. She was just the kind of figure that could serve for the print in which a mother shows her child a great rising sun on the horizon – and in that sun the redeeming word, Future or something.

The home help on the other hand was a child of the war, one hundred per cent. Bread, butter, coal, you had to queue for hours for them, fight and go about it in a crafty way. And at nights there was that animal wail of air raid warnings in the air, and you had to go to the shelters. In our neighbourhood they were hastily dug shelters with a few props and planks on top and the earth from the hole itself over the top. Once it was heroes in helmets that stood in the trenches, now it was children with worried lines round their eyes and mouths. And while she unpicked the wrongly sewn patches of material, she asked all kinds of sneaky questions that undermined my wife's faith. That was her main job, as it was of all war children: to hollow out, undermine, destroy.

And meanwhile, as I said, I was desperately and impossibly in love with her. She knew, the little witch. She ate the ration of bread, butter and meat assigned to me. She put it into her mouth with tender movements and looked at me and made me drown in the lakes of her eyes. She had come to our house for the first time when she was scarcely twelve. And she began staying away, for longer and longer periods, when she was approaching eighteen. She had been there for six long years, every night when I came home – a heaven and a hell, my daughter as it were in the beginning and later almost supplanting my wife. Then the young men started hanging around her like burrs, as she was growing appallingly beautiful. And immediately the war was over and there was enough to eat and she simply did not turn up anymore. She was a child of our time. I didn't see her for years and did not know where or what kind of life she was living.

Now I was crossing the station square, absorbed in a host of worries, and I recognised her at once. She was just getting into her car and rested her hands on the steering wheel, and at once she looked at me – just like then. She was wearing a fur coat. And again with that killer smile she put the car in gear and drove off, just like that, without so much as a hello. The muddy water of a puddle splashed over my trouserlegs.

And fifteen years later I met Vieze again, my god what a shock, he'd become an old man from the worn out feet to the befuddled head. I looked at once at his blue tattooed hands that were once the terror of the female sex, but could scarcely see the anchors and suns beneath the crumpled skin. And worse still, he no longer recognised me.

I asked him if he still remembered this or still remembered that, and in a damn servile voice he said: not that I know of, sir.

And again I remember the man who sent me an enthusiastic postcard when the first edition of this book appeared: I can't put down your Little War and I'll send you a longer letter later. And that's fifteen years ago now and I've never heard a thing about the man, so that I constantly torment myself wondering whether he dropped dead as he went on reading.

Last word

One mustn't speak ill of the dead – but what can I dream up to say that's nice about Madame Ondine? She was a witch, that's what she was, who lived only to badger and torment everyone, to stir up trouble, to see war. What poison gnawed at her insides, made her like that from morn till night, from the cradle to the grave? She had a wimp of a husband who pined away in her shadow and sometimes broke free and stood there drunk yelling, from a distance, that he would murder her. And she had tearaway children that she tried to bring up to be saint but that she had to chase to bed without supper almost every day. She locked them upstairs and then went gossiping in the neighbourhood, casting aspersions on everyone, like a comet towing a tail of hatred and discord behind her. And meanwhile those saintly tearaways of hers set the hovel on fire. My children have been brought up respectably. Because that seemed to be the highest thing attainable in life, to be respectable, to be called a lady. And all her life she struggled frantically to get her paws on the outward symbol of it, money, a bank account, a post office book. She never managed it. She could not call even a chair, however, rickety and worn out, her own. Once she thought she'd hit the jackpot, when the first world war was won-lost, and the defeated German armies withdrew from the front in Flanders. I can still see them with my child's eyes stumbling by, bleeding, filthy, in tattered uniforms. They sang of the *Krieg* that was over and the *Heimat* they were going to see again, and on their way they simply threw away thousands of marks. No one ventured out into the street. Only Madame Ondine was out there, her uncombed hair hanging in strands, her bedraggled skirt covered in margarine stains, her stockings round her ankles and her apron lifted up to carry the fluttering marks in. Occasionally she would stop scrabbling about for an instant and showed heaven the crammed full apron and bared all her grey teeth in a grin. It later turned out that those marks were valueless, that a million marks would scarcely buy you a loaf of bread. She almost went mad, they had to snatch the worthless fortune from her by force and burn it in the courtyard.

Wait till there's war again! she said afterwards. And she focused her husband and her tearaway children on that coming war that was to make her dreams come true. The war came, and the youngest of her tearaways was killed and the eldest became a blackshirt. And she herself? By now she had become old and grey and ill, and one day when she was queuing up for who knows what, she collapsed. She died where she had always lived, in the street.

But as her eyes clouded over she managed to say something very beautiful, something that can be seen not only as *her* last word but also as the last word of this book:

WHAT IS THE POINT OF IT ALL?