

*day by day*

## **DEPORTATION FROM SEVENUM**

Piet Gielen's diary notes · October 1944

8-10-1944

On Sunday, October 8, 1944 Jeu and I went to the first Mass. Soldiers were walking to and fro and Jeu had forgotten to put his ID in his pocket. I was not worried: I had it with me. People coming in later gave warning that an SS raid was to be expected. Jeu and I went to the front; we wanted to escape through the vestry, but that didn't work: Germans everywhere.



When the Mass was over, the thing began. People in hiding sneaked away, Jeu climbed into the tower. A soldier came in and shouted: “All men out for ID check.” Father and I had nothing to fear and went outside. We were herded together on the market place. People over 60 and under 15 could go home, nobody asked for IDs.

Slowly it dawned on us that we would have to go work in Blerick or Venlo. It was announced that family members could bring us working clothes, a blanket and food for two days. Banners were put up with the slogan: “Sevenum is cleared, any man who is still there will be regarded as a terrorist.” Mother brought me an overall, a smock, socks, pants, a blanket, 6 sandwiches and a piece of sausage. Around half past nine, two trucks arrived; the older people could get in. We departed on foot, through Californië<sup>1</sup> on the way to Venlo.



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<sup>1</sup> Californië: area between Sevenum and Grubbenvorst.

We got a ten-minute break at the railway. There were six soldiers with us. If we had known all that was going to happen, we would have hidden ourselves somewhere on the way. After that, we went up till the forests near Soest<sup>1</sup> -- that would have been another good opportunity to escape.

After a half-hour rest, the journey continued in one go until the bridge over the Maas. There we were counted and taken over by the SA<sup>2</sup>. A group from Helden joined us, coming from the direction of Blerick.

While crossing the bridge, we were thinking: "Farewell Sevenum, until after the war." On we went to the railway station, where we were pushed into a cattle carriage, fifty of us. The doors were closed and we were locked in, except for two small windows to let out the stifling hot air and the smoke.

Around half past one, another group arrived, from Kronenberg and America, then another from Helenaveen and Maasbree. It continued like that until dusk. From time to time, the door was opened to let some fresh air in and to alleviate the greatest need, and to ask for water and food to the people from Venlo, which

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1 Soest: an area between Heierhoeve and Grubbenvorst, also called Zaar.

2 SA: Sturmabteilung.

At they readily brought. One man from Venlo who was with the Sevenum group was released by intercession from Venlo people, he had a wife that was ill and ten children.



Around half past eight in the evening we noticed that a locomotive was put on our train. Commands sounded and the train started moving. Immediately we began to pray the Rosary. We had barely started when there was some noise near the windows

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In the picture: the Gielens' home after the war, after some renovation.

sounded thumping. We couldn't see anything, but we suspected that some had jumped out. Baker's Jan<sup>1</sup> had already sneaked out at the station.

Really, my first trip by train has been one never to forget.

After the rumble it became quiet, which was good because Petranus<sup>2</sup> needed all his breath to lead the prayer and be heard above the roar of the train. The train went slow, uphill toward the border. "Goodbye Netherlands. Goodbye Sevenum. Goodbye Mother, Lies, Toon and everyone. Farewell comrades. "

After crossing the border, we went faster. A short halt in Kaldenkirchen, then with a moderate speed to Rheydt: another stop. Then rather fast to...<sup>3</sup> Many got sleepy and sat down as best they could. I wasn't sleepy and stood at the window all the time. Now we were going fast, to the Rhine. The landscape became hilly. We went through a tunnel, stopped a few more times at a red signal; our train was an extra one. The moon had come out of the clouds and lit up the scenery, wonderful.

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1 Jan Gommans, whose father was baker.

2 Dialect short form of "Petrus Johannes".

3 Not readable; maybe "Krefeld".

We arrived at the Rhine, stopped again, then went over the bridge slowly, a long and beautiful bridge. On the other side we saw Düsseldorf. Everything we saw there: destroyed and burned, everything. There were lots of living quarters dug into the ground on the side of the railway, just extending one meter above the ground.



Piet, Lies en Toon, shortly after the war.

On we went, now more towards the south; a few more stops. That was a station in Düsseldorf, dreadful<sup>1</sup>.

9-10-1944

So it went through forests and hills, until suddenly we saw a flashing light in front of the train. The train stopped, reversed onto another line and then stood still again. That was about a quarter to two, in the night between 9 and 10 October.<sup>2</sup> The locomotive was disconnected and driven away. Some men in uniform walked alongside the train. We asked: "Where are we?" "Weiß ich nicht", it sounded and we did not ask further. We tried to sleep a bit.

We woke up when the door was opened and someone shouted: "Eraus, schnell!" (3.30) We quickly gathered our stuff. We had to stand in rows of five next to the railroad; then we found out that six had jumped out in Venlo.

When we were a group, we continued guided by some WA, straight into field. In the distance loomed a large building, and we already thought we would have to get into that, but we went past it. then we had to go up a fairly steep hill. On the top, we came to the gate of a concentration camp, with high barbed wire. The gate was opened and we had to get in. We went through another gate

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1 Dreadfully destroyed.

2 In fact, this was the night between 8 and 9 October.

and then we were standing in front of a large barracks. It had just been cleaned and still smelled strongly of glysol.

We were sent in; after us another group arrived and then we were like sardines. We were fortunate to sit against the wall so we could squat and get a little sleep. The others could not fall over, let alone sit. That lasted until half past six and we were already telling each other: “When will we get out of here.” It was like we had been away from home for three days already, so slowly time seemed to pass.

Suddenly we heard shouting and barking. The “rascals” from the Peel were also in our group. We asked those who stood by the window what was happening. They said that there was another barracks closeby, where people were coming out of and lining up. Apparently, they were not moving quick enough, because a WA-man was shouting horribly.

When it was the rascals’ turn, one of them threw a stone at the dog, but the man released it immediately, the rascal got a bite and let out a good scream. When it was our turn, we thought let’s be quick and not anger the gentlemen. Then we had to stand in the drizzle.

Around seven we were sent back inside. Half an hour later, get out and line up again, then into the other barracks. That had two floors so we had enough space.

There we were allowed to walk around freely, which we readily used to fetch water and relieve ourselves. Now we could finally see all the people who were with us. We were quite surprised at seeing certain people in our group. The men from Helden were in the other half of the camp; they had arrived half past three.

Around noon we had to get out again and line up in rows of five, this time to get soup. Terrible, that long waiting. A bowl with a spoonful of soup that had pretty good taste, especially if you're hungry. Many went back for more, but it was too spicy for my taste, so no more.

After the soup, line up again; this time the craftsmen were picked out. Many preferred to stay with the large group, so they were farmers. Then we were free to walk around until eight. At eight, line up again for soup; I wasn't hungry, so I didn't go. After that, we could get ready to sleep. Well, that was easily said, together we had a blanket and a coat. So we slept on top of our coat and under the blanket.

We had slept for about an hour when we were shaken out of sleep by the sounds of sirens and airplanes. I should mention that we were in a camp in Wuppertal, in the Ruhrgebiet. Grenades and other stuff was coming down. There were factories all around us, so it was dangerous. The defense guns began to rattle heavily and soon one plane came down burning, right above us. I confess that I've never been thinking so strongly of my Four Last Things as then<sup>1</sup>. The plane came lower and lower. Meanwhile, G. van Enckevort<sup>2</sup> came to our window to give us the Absolution. Suddenly, the engines started to howl and the machine crashed against a hill; fortunately it was still several hundred meters away from us. We could breathe again.

A little later another one, but more in the distance. After that, our first bomb alarm in Germany passed uneventfully and we went back to sleep.

We woke up before daybreak, mostly from the cold and the stiff behinds we got from those hard planks. At seven o'clock line up, five by five. We thought we'd get some food, but no sir. Back to the barracks until nine. Meanwhile it started to rain.

10-10-1944

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1 The Four Last Things: Death, the Last Judgement, Hell, and Glory (Heaven)..

2 Maybe a priest from Horst.

At nine, line up for bread. After waiting for an hour, it was our turn. Each of us got a loaf of bread of one and a half kilograms, a piece of cheese and butter. Again into the barracks, at ten stand in rank to leave.

Five farmers who wanted to stay together could remain in Wuppertal. This meant that Oomen Piet, Willem, Joep<sup>1</sup> and two strangers left us.

Soon we marched off, with direction Hanover, Berlin, Hamburg, Brunswick, Thuringia or Friedrichshafen. Enough choice. We were put into cattle cars again, but the doors were not locked. Now we could see Wuppertal's large factories, standing unharmed. At about half past ten the train left, heading northeast, an extra train, so we often had to wait for other trains. By and by we arrived in agricultural areas.

Around 14.00 hours we arrived in a small town, I can't remember the name. Opposite silver factories we stopped, and after about two hours we went on and we arrived around 16.30 in Unna. There we stopped.

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<sup>1</sup> The Gielens' neighbours' son.

Towards the evening I saw someone carrying bushels of straw. I was quick to ask him where we could get that. A few SS men told us that it would be best to ask for a certain farmer close to the city. But along the way, there were some heaps standing by the road, and I plucked out some bushels; I didn't like to sleep on those hard planks any longer. I walked back to the train quickly and on the way I met half the population of the train. By the time we went back, about 2000 kg of straw had disappeared. When we went back again, by a farm, suddenly the farmer was standing in front of us and asked who had given us permission to grab that straw!! I said: "Unsere Zugführer" and just walked on past him.

Before I reached the train, I had already given my two bushels to some who had nothing. Fortunately we had eight thick bushels. Just in time, we were on the train when the signal for departure was given, at nine o'clock. Several more had run away, it was a splendid opportunity, P. Peters, J. Tielen and a few others. We prayed the Rosary, the train stopped a few more times, and then we went to sleep.

After a good night's rest, we woke up in an entirely different region, plane. We arrived at a large sugar factory. We thought we'd have to work there, but no, on we went. We were coming closer to the H. Goering works, mines of iron ore and coal. In

11-10-1944

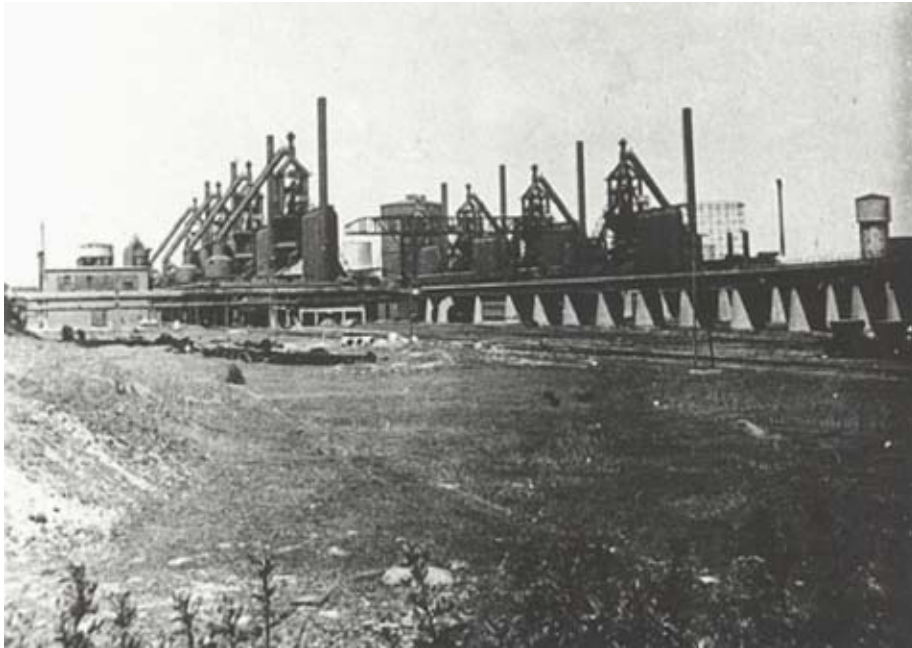
the middle of a plain, the train stopped and we thought we were heading for the mines, but no. Many went out to get sugar beets, which was permitted.

After an hour we started again, in the direction of Salzgitter, passing through Hildesheim and Hamelin. In Salzgitter we stopped at some big factories. Here and there we saw towers on the plain. It was clear, here were underground factories. We were terrified, and we started to pray another rosary. A little later, the train moved back and we fervently hoped to get away from these factories.

Meanwhile it had become evening again. At eight we all had to get off the train, line up five by five, and then marched in the bright moonlight, over a bumpy road running between two large factories, until we arrived at a camp. We saw lots of little lights, but when we got closer they turned out to be lights on the fence: the wires were live with electric power. We had been warned for that.

When we arrived in the barracks, the dining hall was quite to our liking, and in another hall, the dormitory, it was really good. Beautiful!

Double beds, two levels, with a paper straw mattress. We were told to sleep with four in one bed. That was not easy, but we had a bed!! We were used to “narrow sleeping”.



At half past eight we could get soup, tasted good, and those who had no blanket, could get one. I also picked one up and then we all crawled underneath and first prayed the Rosary. About half of us from Sevenum were in the same hall, with some twenty from

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In the picture: steelworks at the H.-Goering-Werke in Salzgitter-Watenstedt.

Helenaveen. Halfway the Rosary the lights were switched off, so we went to sleep, until half past seven in the morning.

12-10-1944

Then we could go pick up bread, about 300 gr. with a lump of butter and also coffee. After that, we were free and had an opportunity to wash ourselves nicely.

The fence was not live anymore, “just to scare us”. There was only one guard, who doubled as Lagerführer and food distributor. The gate was open and many went to climb a nearby hill, 30 meters high over clay soil, that was quite something. On the top, one had a nice view of the camp and the ore groves of the H. Goering works, which were lying all around.

On top of the hills, trees were cut away, modern excavators loaded the ore onto carriages, after that other machines were digging even deeper. Behind us there was a large beech forest in autumn colors. We went to collect beechnuts.

Around noon we got soup again. The rascals were always first and then stood waiting to see if anyone didn't like the soup, or had too much.

Then we slept a bit, until about three. Lining up, getting counted, then we were free. In the evening some soup again and a piece of bread for the morning. We also still had bread from Venlo and Wuppertal, we only ate two thin slices every time. We even got jam with it. I wanted to give it away (I had never eaten jam before) but it wasn't bad at all. We went to sleep again after the Rosary.

From time to time we heard a thump, then someone had fallen out again. How could it be otherwise, with four men on two single beds together and two high. Father was on the side, then I, then Thei Koenen and Waeg-Bert's long Grad<sup>1</sup>. We were lying "head to butt."

At nine o'clock in the morning we got coffee, then lining up and counting again.

13-10-1944

Some "gentlemen" in uniform picked out some ... and ...<sup>2</sup> Also an engineer from the coal mines came for people, but half of us were too old and the other half were farmers, meaning he could not use those either. 280 men were sent to the sugar factory. We were about six hundred in that camp, from Neer, Helden, America,

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1 Gerald, son of Bert Hermans the street sweeper.

2 Unreadable; probably certain craftsmen.

Helenaveen, Kronenberg and Sevenum. Seven hundred men from Helden and Neer had been split off already in Wuppertal.

At 13:00h: line up and bring all our things. We're leaving for ???  
Four "Schlossers"<sup>1</sup> had been picked out already in the morning and stayed in the factory in the camp: Har Janssen, Bèr Lommen and two from Verbaarschot.

After a one-hour wait, the first group started out for Salzgitter, on foot to the sugar factory. Some time later another group, to ??  
Another half hour later, the guys from Kronenberg, Helenaveen and America left. The rascals had to remain in the camp, which was good, because they were stealing like ravens.

... [Several illegible pages]

... until we arrived at a large building. Inside we went down a few steps and stood in a large stable of a former army barracks. There was a large heap of straw, inviting to sleep on. But first came a Fräulein with a big pot of tasty soup. That was the best I had had in Germany so far. After the rosary we went to bed. For the first time we had enough space, but cold... stone floor, windows open and so large!

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<sup>1</sup> German "Schlosser": metal construction worker.

In the morning there was coffee and a slice of bread, then workers were picked out for several factories. We could also choose ourselves, but nobody knew where he would be best off. Names and birthdates were recorded. Father said it would be best if I showed my ID, because that was faster; otherwise one had to spell it out letter by letter.

I regretted it a thousand times, because I was recorded as being 17. Otherwise I could have registered as 18 years old; now I didn't get a smoking card. Anyway. Soon, the first workers were picked up to go in the direction of Northeim, a city with a diameter of 70-80 km.

Lod Coumans and Schaer Sjeng<sup>1</sup>, Father and I were sent to an engine factory in Lauterberg. At 1 pm, a boy, aged 15, came and made a show of calling our names. We went to the station, set out for Bad Lauterberg, 40 km further.

Opposite the station was a big factory, but no we had to go further, fortunately, away from railway station and factory, because of the bombs. After 10 minutes walk we saw a shop with a sign "Niemeyer Tabak". We were thinking: "We wish we still had that." A young guy, speaking Dutch, came to meet us. He was

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<sup>1</sup> Schaer Sjeng: "John the barber".

from Rotterdam, worked in the factory where we were going; he would show us the way.

A little further, around the corner we saw a few halls, with a small chimney, but that, as we heard later, only smoked for the laundry woman. From a distance you could not see that it was an engine factory, it might as well be a few barns. But when I saw the engines, I liked it, fixing bolts and stuff.

Behind the factory were a couple of barracks, not two weeks old, the [cement] floors were still wet. There were 8 single beds two-high, two tables, 16 chairs, and 8 double cupboards. There was a stove as well. We put our stuff on a bed, our guy from Rotterdam was there again, and lots of questions were asked from both sides.

A yellow car arrived in a dashing manner. “The boss,” said our companion. He got out, a kind man with a lame leg, but I liked him. He asked a few questions and went off to fetch blankets. Meanwhile it had become dark and our new friends came back from town. After the introduction we even got a cigarette from Mike. He was sympathetic to me. Mike even warned us for a tall, rough guy with a big mouth, who’d have “long fingers”. We played cards for a bit, yes really, but we couldn’t enjoy it yet.

Then we went to sleep and for the first time since one week I took off up my shoes and upper clothes. I was lying upstairs with father next to me.

I must say: “I’ve slept well in my new bed.” We asked other Dutch if there was a church, but the answer was “no”.

15-10-1944

Our French companions had risen early and later came home with a bag of “petatte”<sup>1</sup>; they had been digging out what the farmers had skipped. In the afternoon we had a walk through the town, which is between two mountains. The name says it: “Lauter-berg”. In a youth hostel, we visited a couple of Dutch, who gave us potatoes, coffee, washing powder, and a saucepan. We were happy with it. We cooked the potatoes in their skin, that was my job, and they tasted delicious.

16-10, Monday morning, six o’clock, the voice of the Lagerführer: “Aufstehen”, but that was for the Italians and French.

16-10-1944

We didn’t have working clothes yet. In the afternoon we got meal cards, for 7 kg of bread, 1 kg salt, 1 kg sugar, 1 p. sausage, 1 p. butter. In the evening, we played cards and went off to sleep.

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1 Petatte: the Limburgish word for “potatoes”.

- 17-10-1944 In the morning we got trousers, a coat and a shirt at the office.
- 18-10-1944 Today we were starting work: “Alles für die Endsieg” – “Everything for the final victory.” The two guys from Rotterdam worked on machines of which we understood nothing. I was glad I could do something when they put me to work on a “härtmaschine”<sup>1</sup> (don’t know what it was?) with two German boys. The work was not heavy or pressured. The others were in another hall, they had to grind.
- 19-10-1944 Thursday again the same job, until about two o’clock, when I got into an argument with the two boys about going to church. They were defending the SS. I went to the other shed to do some grinding with Father and the others.
- 20-10-1944 The next day we were done at around noon and I had to return to my härtmaschine; the boys kept quiet about church. Our friend had given them a piece of his mind, which I also did from now on.
- 21-10-1944 Saturday night we had a nice wash and went to bed. We didn’t know of any church yet.
- 22-10-1944 Sunday afternoon we went for a walk and to drink a pot of beer.

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1 German “Härtemaschine”: hardening/tempering machine.

The guys from Rotterdam ate in the “Wirtschaft” in the evenings and wanted to arrange that for us too, but there was no place anymore for us three. Father and I stayed home and cooked our own meals. It wouldn't have been fun too: having to walk for twenty minutes to go eat. Also, we had not received any money yet; it seems the first week here is without salary.

Saturday<sup>1</sup> we got our bread cards, but without bonus. We received 2200 gr. bread - 225 gr. sugar - 175 gr. marmalade - 62.5 gr. cheese - 50 gr. coffee - 3 kg. potatoes - 250 gr. meat - 125 gr. butter - 20 gr. margarine.

The next day we also got a smoking card for 60 cigarettes per month, except me (17 y.o.) and an additional card for 900 gr. bread, 200 gr. meat and 50 grams of margarine. We also got a soap card for 1 pc. washing soap, 1 pc. shaving soap and 2 pc. detergent.

From all that cold and wet feet I had caught a bad cold, and I stayed in bed on Tuesday morning.

Monday morning we also got a stamp card to register at what time we arrived at work and when we left. I had again to do grinding, together with Vader and a few Italians, for 14 days long.

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<sup>1</sup> This may still refer to 21 October. The chronological order is less clear now.

We also had to move to another barracks and there got a bed in a corner, together with Father. Sjeng, Piet and Lod were in the bed below.

This week we got our first “salary”: 20 Reichsmark, minus 10 RM that we had received in advance. They didn’t subtract anything for shoes and clothes.

22-10-1944      On our third Sunday in Germany, Father and I went up the hills in bright autumn weather: Lauterberg lay beautiful in the valley. Sjeng and Peter went into town. A little later Lod arrived with the brothers Achten, who are in Scharzfeld; one works with a contractor, the other at a bicycle repair shop.

29-10-1944      Last week, Sjeng and Peter had discovered that there was indeed a church in Lauterberg. Sunday we started out early and yes, we found one. It was a large (meeting) hall of the SS. There weren’t many Lauterbergers in the church, mostly Italians and French. We also met several people from Helden, and Lommen Thei and Wiel Rijs; they were as far from the church as we.

The rite was quite different, however: No Introitus, Gloria, Kyrie and Credo, but they did have other songs. It was on the Feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday in October.<sup>1</sup>

Monday after that<sup>2</sup>, I was freezing terribly in the cold factory, and on Tuesday I stayed in bed. The “master” didn’t say anything. Also on Wednesday and Thursday I slept in late.

Friday<sup>3</sup> was All Saints’ Day; I went to work with the others and in the evening at quarter to seven we went to the High Mass.

After that, we wrote a letter<sup>4</sup> home.

[End of manuscript.]

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1 Unclear: this feast is celebrated at the end of November.

2 Or “before”? The descriptions of this week and the previous one seem to be mixed.

3 Unclear: All Saints’ Day (1 November) was a Wednesday in 1944.

4 This letter most likely never arrived.

Two passages from Lies' diary:

13 April 1945

Petrannes Hoogers has come home. Not quite believing it but curious, Mother went to have a look, and it was crowded! Everybody wanted to know about other workers. Father and Piet were not with them yet, but they were doing well.

Petrannes had been in Eisdorf with Uncle Jacob, that's 20 km from Bad Lauterberg where ours were. They were sending each other letters regularly, and Piet had visited Petrannes just before he had left. Piet was fat like a lord mayor, he said, but he was troubled by sores, so he had not worked much.

Through Petrannes, Uncle Jacob had sent a letter which also contained something about our men. They had always been able to fulfil their Sunday duty.

On Sunday we'll go to Tienray<sup>1</sup> in a group to pray that all may return soon.

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<sup>1</sup> Tienray: "Little Lourdes", a place of pilgrimage in Northern Limburg.

22 May 1945

Today, Father turns 47. And there's no end to the rain!!!

At two pm, Chris Huys from the neighbours came running in: "Piet is almost home." And indeed, there he was, with packs and bags. Mother was just in church, praying the Rosary for neighbour-aunt Huys who had passed away, and Father was in Horst at the doctor's. A pity, but the joy was the greater when everyone was home again.

Father and Piet had been working together in the same place most of the time. On his way back, Piet had organized an accordion somewhere. "Nothing for nothing," was his word. Now we could really celebrate, and in a few days, there will be a fair in town, that won't go unnoticed!

