

Herb DeLevie

Born in Rheine (Westphalia), Germany, on May 7, 1934, Herb DeLevie was the second of two children born to a German mother, ~~Hertha~~, and a Dutch father, Nathan, a prosperous cattle dealer. The DeLevie family, which had roots in Holland dating from the 1600s, moved to Stadskanaal, Holland, in 1936 to escape the growing persecution of Jews in Germany.

Were your parents friendly with non-Jews?

Yes, you would almost have to be. The Jewish ~~community~~ was very small, and our synagogue, which was relatively small, could seat maybe a hundred people in the High Holidays. They would come in from all surrounding towns, small towns, very much like a small village does here in the States. In our town, like I said, we were only three Jewish families, or four.

What was the population of Stadskanaal?

About 8,000. So the entire Jewish community, gathering about seven small towns of equal size, would fill the synagogue, but that would be about it.

Was there anti-Semitism before the war?

Not until about mid-1940s. The Germans invaded Holland in 1940. They did not really start making their presence known in all parts until the middle 1940s. The very first thing I remember is my mother crying and my father saying that he would have to make preparations to go into hiding because he felt that the Jews were going to be gathered like in



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*Herb and Edith DeLevie ice skating,
Stadskanaal, Holland, 1940.*

Germany and there was no way out. And in the 1940s is when I remember-that exactly I don't recall. I was what, six, seven.

Did your schoolmates tease you?

The Dutch, not at all, no, not before the war. Before the war, in general, the townspeople were very anti-German. Our friends were very pro-Jewish. No, I never felt anything before the war.

In late 1940, Nathan Delevie went into hiding; his wife and children joined him six months later. For four years the family hid in one room of a small farmhouse on the outskirts of Stadskanaal together with an uncle, an aunt, three young cousins, an elderly couple, another cousin in his twenties, and several people in transit. To keep occupied, Herb sketched his surroundings and read more than 3,000 books provided by the Dutch underground.

What was it like when you joined your father in hiding?

We arrived at night and we were very excited, and I remember running to say hello to my father and running through the place which was going to be our home, and we knew it was going to be. For how long, we didn't know, but we knew we were going to be there for quite a while. And this house was a very typical farmer's helper-type house. It was one building. We came in the back door; the front door, I guess, was never used. I don't ever remember it being opened. When you walked out the back door, immediately to the right was the outhouse, which was the only toilet in the place, and from there when you walked past, if you made a left turn you walked into a small barn, which contained a horse pen, a pigpen, and two cattle stalls and an opening space large enough to have a little bit of hay and one wagon.

It was a very small farmhouse. That particular barn was on one side of the house, and then if you walked to the back door instead of turning left you went straight ahead you went into the main kitchen, which was also the main living room. It was a combination kitchen and living room, and it had two bedsteads in it. These were big closets that open up and had the built-in beds. From there you walked straight ahead and to the left there was their formal living room, which also housed two bedsteads. That was to be our room. And immediately to the right of that corridor was another bedroom, which was used for the people who lived there. It was a relatively small room. And that was the extent of the house. There was no attic and there was no basement. There was crawl space

and the rafters were right up to the ceiling. There was nothing there, just a little typical Dutch farmhouse. Dirt floor in the kitchen and the barn and the room we were in and the front room had a wooden floor with about a foot and a half, two feet of space underneath it when we got there. We made a trap door into that room and made a big hiding place underneath the floor, but that happened while we were there.

Who owned the farm?

A family by the name of Drente. A man, wife, and two daughters. He was a day laborer, very poor. He used to make his living off working on farms for people, seasonal, and running a *bagger* [dredging] ship, which is a flat boat that would mix up turf that you burn for fuel. . . . When I say run, that means you load the boat and the man pulls it with the rope, or you have a horse that pulls it and he drives the horse. You pull this through the canals, which was quite common in Holland. So the family was very poor, the house was a very poor house, very simple, again, very low class, bottom of the scale Dutch type of living.

When did other people join you in hiding at the farmhouse?

My father's brother was the first one to come. The timing, I guess, was about two or three months where my father's brother was in one place and his family was someplace else and they couldn't stay where they were. First, my father's brother's underground contact came to find out if he could be hidden with us, and I recall that being discussed. First he came, and then within a very short time thereafter the rest of the family joined by the wishes of my uncle. Again with the agreement that, okay, a few more doesn't make any difference, it isn't going to last very long anyway. So his wife came with three children. The kids were all within one year of each other up and down. One was one year younger, one was my age, and one was one year older. Two boys and one girl. The girl was the oldest.

Who else joined you?

After they had joined us was an older couple, Dalsines-they were like a second cousin to my dad-joined us. They were considerably older. He had a very bad case of asthma, and he was in his middle fifties, middle to late fifties, and they came and joined us and that was about

two months after my uncle did. Then there was a family that lived with us for about four months. That was a temporary—they were only going to be there for a week. It was a man and wife and three children again, and they stayed for about four months before they were moved elsewhere. Then a cousin from my father, a single man, came and joined us. He was about twenty-one, twenty-two, and he stayed for the duration* This gentleman took care of our education when he came. He had a college education, and he was the one who taught us. He stayed for the duration.

How many children were in the house?

At one time there were eleven kids. It was a short time while the family with the three kids were there, another family came in with two kids, and then there were two kids by themselves that came, without parents, for a short period of time. They were there for six weeks, two months.

Did this become a common place for the underground to bring people?

Not really, considering the amount of people that had to be hidden. I'm saying this all as if it happened all at once; it really wasn't so. For about a year, it was just my father's brother and his family and us. Then after about a little less than a year, the old couple joined us. Then for four months then the single man joined us and just about the same time the family with three kids were there for four months. For about two weeks before they left, the two kids came and joined us by themselves, and they were all removed again and put elsewhere. I have no idea what happened to them, just lost track. The nucleus of the group was for about two years the adults, the older couple, the single man, my father's brother and his wife, my parents, and us five kids. Those were permanent residents, so to speak.

And all of these people were living in that one room?

That's right.

How did you deal with so many people in such a small space?

First, it was no problem, of course, even with all the people, because everybody is fresh. Usually when you arrive you have some amount of supplies of some kind, whether it be food, something to read, these type

of things. The biggest problem at first was the children, to keep them quiet and from fighting, and you played games and you did odds and ends to keep occupied. So the first five, six months were no problem. Then the little bickering began. Each group as they arrived had a different source of the underground and depending what the source is your supplies would be different. So what everybody got would not necessarily be the same as far as food and clothing or whatever the underground would bring in or be able to bring in. The first six, seven, eight months weren't too bad.

We were told to be absolutely quiet, the children were. My father insisted I learn how to draw and he stood behind me with a stick and made me draw, copy things, whether it be a bird or a building or a tree or draw a cow or whatever it was. And we had sufficient games to amuse ourselves with for the first period of time. Also the first months, not knowing how long it was going to be and having been separated for some time, there was a lot to talk about.

After a while, the talking ceased and the nerves began to set in. The food became more scarce, small illnesses began-small colds-and you couldn't cough so you coughed in a cushion. And privacy became an irritant-going on the potty in the room, people became a little pickier, Everybody became a little more on each other's nerves. One of the main sources of irritation was the older couple that joined us. The gentleman had asthma. He'd be burning something in a little cup that would smell up the whole place and be coughing like to clear your throat and his asthma condition and that would be done in a tent because it had to be kept quiet.

The biggest argument I remember was that after he'd been there about six, seven months he got a couple of eggs from one of his sources and my father felt that the eggs should be cooked-this happened a couple of times-and they would eat the egg, this older couple, and us kids would be watching. And my father was kind of temperamental anyway, so he lost his cool one time and said, "The least you can do is give the kids the egg instead of eating it yourself." And that led to a big argument with the result being that we got, in turn, first was the youngest, which was my cousin, got a little top slice of the white, and he ate that, and the next time there was an egg we all had the rotation. It was this type of a thing that became a very great irritant.

Also, the other kids became very bored. They were not as self-involved, I guess is the word, as I was. I did a lot of reading. There were always plenty of books, and if I'd read them once I'd start over again, and I was drawing and I enjoyed it. None of the others did. This

period was all before the single gentleman joined us. After about nine months that we were there, this younger man joined us.

Just before he arrived my aunt had a nervous breakdown and just about the same time that she had a nervous breakdown, the SS decided that there should be a watch at the road that went past the place that we were in hiding, and they set up a permanent watch to check everybody going back and forth there because they decided there was smuggling going on from Germany into Holland. So now we were faced with having two Germans sitting by the back door who often came in for coffee in the one room, and when they were there, of course, we couldn't even as much as whisper. They would sit in the main room, which was the kitchen/dining/living room for the people, and we were in the next room over. It was visible if the door was open and you could see two doors leading from the corridor. Luckily they never really went in because the people we were hiding with were kind to them, so to speak. Also the owner, the man, had gotten a job working for the Germans and the older girl was dating some of the Germans and worked as a secretary for them and they were generally considered by them as being traitors and being supportive of the Germans and against the Dutch. So they were treated by the Germans as more or less special people, which made it a little easier for us because they were not considered a risk anymore.

The first real illness was the nervous breakdown of my aunt, which lasted for almost two or three weeks. I remember her having to be tied to the bed because she wanted to move around and wanted to get out and my mother and her husband and my father putting a pillow over her head so nobody would hear her screaming and so on. Right after that my sister had a nervous breakdown, wanted to get out, wanted to kill herself, and while she was having that, the oldest girl of my father's brother ended up with the measles and that became the biggest fear, fear of the different sicknesses and how to treat it because there was just nobody you could call in so you did the best you can. Luckily things worked out.

But these things added that much pressure to it at the same time the food became scarcer. It was harder and harder for the underground to come in and supply on a regular basis, and of course the people who were hiding us could not go in and purchase sufficient food to feed that many people without [people] asking questions. So we basically at that time started and continued to have a steady diet of brown beans with no meat and water, and that lasted for just about the duration. Occasionally we had a little piece of spek, which is pork fat. And when I say little piece, it would be about a centimeter square and we'd work on that little tidbit at a time.

After we were there about nine, ten months, just about when my sister was so bad, this single gentleman joined us, and there was a lot of discussion as to whether we wanted him or not and it was decided that we would take him in because he was more educated. He was a second cousin of my father, and he would then educate us and keep us busier with schoolwork, which is the way it worked out to begin with. However, at first he slept on the floor like everybody else, but he got close to the [Drentes'] oldest daughter and ended up sleeping with her. . . . After he'd been there for about four months he started sleeping with her and nine months later she had a baby, which everybody said was an SS baby, but this caused some additional crises because now this young man was living more or less with the family and eating better and sleeping better than the rest of us. He was still teaching us, but now he was treated more or less as the husband of the older daughter. During that entire thing, the discussions that went on about this, the arguments, the discussions or fights my father and his brother had with this fellow, Benny, were very severe from the standpoint of "How can you do this at times like this, number 1. Number 2, you're Jewish, she's just a *shiksa* [non-Jewish girl], how can you? You lower yourself? You know, "What about your parents' memories," et cetera.

Just before the baby was born my mother came down with a nervous breakdown, and that lasted for about thirty days. In between that time the Dalsines, the older couple, were offended by the different problems we would have and the older man was feeling kind of sickly but they had gotten to the point that they would just sit in a corner and hang a sheet around them and didn't want anybody to approach them. That was their corner, they wouldn't talk with anybody, they wouldn't share with anybody. They'd get books to read-they wouldn't share. They got very impatient with the kids and apparently we got on their nerves like they did on everybody else's nerves, and they would begin to hit out at us and then my father would get back at them and it got to be a very stilted free-for-all. That was the general atmosphere, and it pretty well continued. Every adult during those three years was ill and three of the children. I myself stayed healthy and so did my oldest cousin.

Occasionally there were notifications, just about once a month, every six weeks, of house-to-house searches and depending on how or who was conducting these, we would either hide underneath the floor in a hiding place that we had dug out or go out in the field at night and hide out there and sometimes we were out there for four or five days not knowing when [we would be able to go back].

Did the Drentes bring you food at night?

No, there was no way to do that because we had to sneak out when the Germans were either being kept occupied or would not be there for a short period of time and then they would reappear and we'd have to wait until they leave. At one time we were out there I think for twenty-two days. This was during the fall and we ate the corn that was there and grass and whatever we could find, drank the water that was running through the little moats that are very plentiful in Holland* Actually, there was never a house search at this place, so even though we took the precautions, as it turned out, the house was never searched. Once somebody came in and when they recognized that [Mr. Drente] was working for the SS, they just said, "Well, how are you?" and had a cup of coffee and left.

The day-to-day stories are pretty much a repeat of the generalization. I can't remember all the little fights and all the little things, but the general atmosphere was one of this kind of fear, nerves being shattered, weakness because of lack of food and lack of exercise, and a continuing feeling of helplessness as time went on and on.

How did you receive advance notification of these searches?

Because [Mr. Drente] worked for the SS. Since he worked for the headquarters, which happened to be in our [old] house-they had occupied the house that we lived in as the SS headquarters-since he worked there he would hear or see the bulletin or know that this was going to occur.

Did Mr. Drente ever bring you reading material?

No, no, he never brought anything. He was sort of illiterate, so his daughters would bring. But the underground, when they did come, would come in with thirty, forty books at a time.

How would they bring books?

In the evenings by prior arrangement, by leaving them on the boat that this man had anchored in front of the house and this man then would go out and bring them in. Occasionally they would bring it in themselves. A few times medicine had to be gotten and this man would know who

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to contact and somebody would bring it. It was never the same person; it was always somebody different who would do this. On two or three occasions I did actually see the person who brought something.

What type of reading material did you get?

You name it. I went through an entire library from children's stories to philosophy, geography, you name it. I must have read over 3,000 books in that period of time, most of them twice. And to this day I can pick up a book I haven't read, but it's an older book and I read it and I know I've read it but I just don't remember where, the particulars of it. Yes, anything that was printed, we read. Didn't make any difference.

Did reading serve as an escape for you?

I would assume so. There is no doubt that-what was there to do? You either sit and do nothing, you either get into an argument about who was using what for that time, toys were being destroyed, you get sick and tired of playing Monopoly. And besides my drawing, which I liked because I was good at it, and the reading, there was nothing else to do. And this was twenty-four hours a day. You can only sleep so much and after a while you can't sleep, you can't move around, there's really no

place to stretch out, you can stand in the corner, there's not sufficient chairs to go around, what do you do? You do what you can.

Could you get any exercise at all, even just pacing around?

How do you pace around a small room filled with that many people? When we first were there, yes, we did some morning calisthenics and so on but after a while there's just no way. There's too much stuff laying around, your bunks, even though you roll them up and put them aside during the day, you still-six, seven adults and five kids and a small confined place and there's just no place to move.

Did you have a daily routine with the tutor?

To some degree. We continued to get up when it got [to be] morning because people got up, you woke up, and you had to go to bed when it got dark because you couldn't afford to have a light be seen from the outside. So we had some flashlights and some candles but basically you could not do much at dark. So the daytime hours was the only time to do something. In the morning we had a wash basin, we washed ourselves. The pail of water was brought in usually, and then we had whatever breakfast there was, whether it be a piece of bread or leftover beans or whatever was there, and then we would study or read or whatever. So we had a couple of hours of what was called quiet time. The education, because of the different ages, was very general, and this fellow was fairly good in math and the languages but the other things didn't amount to that much. So what we ended up doing is discussing the books that we read and whatever we got out of the library and this was done for a couple of hours a day. At first it was much more intense. You'd do two, three hours in the morning, two, three hours in the afternoon. But the fellow couldn't take it and us kids couldn't take it and the parents couldn't take it because they had to be quiet while we were doing this. They couldn't go anywhere either, and they got bored with it, and it got on their nerves. So it became much more on a one-to-one basis where you could quietly sit in the corner and do something. So that way everybody got an hour, two hours a day, but not at the same time.

What did you study?

Math was organized. We studied philosophy, discussed philosophy, and that was based on the books that were available. Geography was an open

discussion as to what everybody knew about the world. You played games like naming the countries of the world and their capitals, the biggest river, the biggest mountains, and these type of stuff, and we had an atlas and we looked them up—these type of things. The physics and biology were again—outside of the basics, were based on what we could understand from the books that were coming in. Some of the concepts were very far out and some of them were totally erroneous. A formal line of education wasn't there after the first six months, because basically we had exhausted what he knew because of the concentration. I mean it was an ideal learning situation if you had the mental ability, and the mental ability is very surprising, but the power of concentration is very, very difficult. It seems to become less and less even though you have nothing else to occupy your mind. It seemed that your mind is so occupied with your physical discomfort and the negative vibrations, I guess is the modern word for it, that float around you that you're constantly a bundle of nerves. Every sentence you have to read twice and nothing seems to stick, and that was the case in almost all of us.

Were you afraid because there were people constantly in the house?

That's right, and it was a very small house. Everything could be heard, like you could hear everything that happened in the kitchen and you never knew who would be coming in. It was just established. You talked in a whisper. If somebody was there you didn't talk at all.

Did you know if someone was in the kitchen?

You could hear them come in, yes, and like I say, you could hear almost everything. So, yes, we talked in a whisper. When I say whisper, it was a whisper. You could not cry. If you were punished and you cried, your head was stuffed in a pillow. If you were in pain, if you had stomach cramps or any kind of a pain, whether you're an adult or not, sound was something that just could not be made. The rule was adhered to, it was necessary.

Was there a semblance of a family situation? Did the parents still act as parents?

Well, your parents remained your parents. The problem was more [with] the overriding what the other adults would say to the kids that were not

theirs. My father and his brother were very close all their lives, but for my uncle to say something to me, that was like waving a red flag in front of the bull. Especially after a while, ““How dare you pick on my children! Look at your own,” and vice versa. So everybody kind of did their own thing and everybody was afraid to go over a mark of criss-crossing. You had to keep some kind of discipline. My father was fairly well in charge for most of the time because he was the strongest willed, and that of course led to arguments also. But he still was the strongest and he did lay down the rules and kept them enforced and that, too, was necessary because without it we never would have made it either. Everything kind of interlocks. You do what you have to. You face the circumstances and you must live within it or leave it. And if you're leaving, all right. We didn't because we felt the choice was not really there.

Did you maintain any religious practices while in hiding?

Yes, we did. As a matter of fact, we *davened* [prayed] every morning [to have] something to do. Yes, we kept the holidays the best we could, at least observed them by name. The religious practices, the *davening*, morning, evening, doing Shabbas services, filled time, therefore they were done. Religion was discussed quite a bit, again as a time filler. The big problem was that nobody that was with us knew much from anything because all of us, my parents and us kids, were too young to know much, and my parents were also educated by indoctrination. My father could read [Hebrew], not well. He knew what to observe, what was the proper thing to read, but not a word was understood. He had a couple of *tefillot* [prayers] that were translated in German and Dutch but everything was Hebrew to Hebrew so it was just a question of reading and no way to understand what you read and recalling what it was about because of their prior education. It was quite limited. It was more a dogmatic adherence to tradition, which we did.

What happened when you heard about the Normandy invasion?

By the time that we had the news of the Normandy invasion, they were already in Belgium, and then the next news was they were already in Holland, and we figured that at this pace they'll be there within a week. Then they were stopped, but now there was hope. I mean, here was freedom so it was like a resurgence of everything and no matter what happened, we were going to make it.

How did you get that news?

This came at first from the man who was hiding us and then an underground person came in again. As a matter of fact, at one time, when we heard that news we were already packing up ready to go and we thought the Germans were leaving and then it turned out that they were reinforcing and more Germans came in. So we had to go back in, and that lasted another five and a half months. . . .

The actual liberation was that the Canadian tank division had arrived in one part of our town and they were held up—our town was predominantly made of canals and bridges—and the canal where we were in hiding was one of the major canals that went into the Stadskanaal main fare and this had a big bridge on it. The bridge was blown, and when we heard that the Canadians were at this bridge we figured that it would only be a matter of moments. For three days they couldn't cross that bridge and then again the man who was hiding us told us that the Germans were packing up and leaving. That's when we packed up and went to the point where we felt we could make contact with the Canadians, and we were ready. We took the bicycles and left, all these people [on] a couple of bicycles, and we packed what little we had and us kids were going to run out except we couldn't. And we were going to scream and we couldn't. We had to go about two kilometers up the canal and we couldn't make it. We met some people we knew about the last quarter kilometer and they practically carried us to where the Canadians were, but the bridge was gone and we could see the Canadian tanks. So the Canadians had a raft and they came and one by one took us to the other side and that was the actual liberation. It took another four days before the Canadians actually were able to cross this particular stretch of canals and secure our city and the rest of Holland.

Could you communicate with the Canadians? Did you speak any English?

No, no, What is there to communicate? You get a big hug and I remember getting a candy bar, But then you didn't need to communicate. They could see with their faces that it was worth it to them, and what we felt, I can't really describe.

After liberation, the DeLevie family returned to their home, and Nathan DeLevie resumed his cattle business. The family immigrated to the United States in December, 1949, and settled in Madison, Wisconsin, where Herb DeLevie attended high school and enrolled in the University of Wisconsin.

A chance encounter with Frank Lloyd Wright resulted in DeLevie's acceptance at Taliesin in May, 1953. He studied architecture there for two years and then worked as an architect in various locations before returning to Madison shortly after his marriage to Monica Freund-Fasslicht in 1964. The couple had two children before her death in 1975; two years later, DeLevie married Deena Slafer. He died on October 4, 1989.