

# Stolen Innocence

*'From religious manipulation  
to wholeness'  
'It cost a life'*

**Ria La Rivière**

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# Foreword

By : Jenny Schneider-van Egten

"Power is a structural fact. That is the first thing we have to recognize. The misuse of power can be expressed, for example, in sexual abuse, violence or manipulation. For the victims, they are all equally bad. Ria's book is so important because it shows the awful consequences of (religious) manipulation. From a social point of view, it is this kind of psychological violence that produces the largest group of victims."

"This booklet shows ministers, leaders, pastors, what the consequences are when you assume to speak 'on God's behalf', because it pushes the listener into the corner, and he/she has no defence. It is also apparent that well-intended sermons can provoke very different reactions in different people. A sermon about God the Father could have a totally adverse effect on women who have been sexually abused by their own fathers. It has to do with the many 'Images of God' circulating among us. And projecting the wrong kind of image (e.g. a 'God who always answers your prayers') can cause considerable disappointment in some people."

"Ria's story will be familiar to many. She describes examples of abuse, carried out by people, relatives (including church ministers), whom you should normally be able to trust. And that is hard to bear. It is true that many people are happy to place their trust in others, but not everyone is able to handle that (assumed) trust so well. And it is very sad that people misuse that fundamental trust in order to manipulate. In Ria's case it was a brother, a sister and a brother-in-law. Outside impulses are necessary before the situation can be critically evaluated. In this case, there were not enough of these impulses, so that Ria found herself imprisoned in this manipulation circuit for far too long. Her perception was razor-sharp, but it took many years before she dethroned her extended family and started to make her own decisions. And, finally, she was free! Her story also shows how important it is for every religious community, church, and movement

to have critical thinkers among it. Situations should be questioned, critically analyzed and put into perspective; in matters of faith too. As a young girl, Ria has an instinctive understanding of what was going on, but dares not dethrone the negative power around her. As time goes by, her perceptive powers increase, and she finally summons the courage to define her contours. This is followed by a period of learning to see people in their true colours, an incorrect image of God has to be replaced, and distorted expectations of faith have to be restored. She was fortunately sensible enough to seek professional help, available as part of the Regional Mental Health Care services.

It is quite an undertaking, in the wake of false security, to look for real security. You see much the same thing in other kinds of violence, such as sexual abuse within the nuclear family. The outside world assumes that the family environment constitutes the pinnacle of security, whereas for the victims it is the pinnacle of insecurity. The victim wonders : 'How can you make this clear to someone else, and how can you extricate yourself from it?' It is even more difficult if the inherent desire for freedom and independence is deliberately smothered by the so-called irrefutable tenets of faith, or determines the kind of behaviour expected of you. And if, as a child, you are not given the support you need, then there is no way out."

Ria's stories are pure. A kind of instantaneous camera exposure, which gives a very painful total impression.

The events are set down in razor-sharp terms. The reader is then left totally free to draw his/her own conclusions. This style also makes the book extremely appropriate for therapeutic sessions. It might take the form of reading one of the stories, after which the participants would be asked to respond by writing down their first impression (one sentence) on paper. The sentences would then be read out loud, one after the other, and without comment. After that, an in-depth group-discussion would follow. I can but rejoice that this book has been published. As I said earlier : many will recognize something of themselves in it and will be encouraged. There will be some who will say : 'You see, I was not mad, this is how I experienced it too.' I also believe that this book will not join the ranks of the most popular

literature for church ministers and leaders. They will, after all, find themselves confronted by their own authority and power. And yet it is precisely these people who should read this book, because it can only get them thinking. The book's strength lies in the telling of true events, a sketch, without launching into philosophical or moralistic sermons about them. In my opinion, it could also serve as an excellent instrument in training and reflection sessions."

"In my view, you cannot convert anyone. But you can stimulate and initiate all kinds of processes to that end. And that is indeed what happened in Ria's story. I expect this book to usher in a new and open climate of discussion. Because there is a very great need for it, if both the truth and the terrible consequences of sexual and psychological violence are to become discussible, and certainly when it takes place within a church or community environment.

The book will thus help victims to create their own 'security', and to be accepted for what they are."

### **Jenny Schneider-van Egten**

*Jenny is an expert in the field of abuse perpetrated against women. As the widow of a church minister, she has met many harrowing cases at close hand. She once made the mistake of bringing perpetrator (a father) and victim (the daughter) together, at which point the perpetrator promised never again to abuse his daughter. It was only many years later that Jenny discovered that on that very same evening the perpetrator inflicted severe bodily harm on his daughter and was able from then on to abuse her and other children for another five years. Jenny has seen that you cannot get very far with good intentions alone. Misdeeds have to be called by name, and those misdeeds must carry consequences for the perpetrators. Victims must be given professional help.*

*The year 1985 saw the publication of the book 'Religion and Incest' (written by Annie Inbens and Ineke Jonker). One of the results of this was the establishment of a women's group (comprising theologians,*

*sociologists and victims) to study how this subject could be placed on church agendas, and to initiate a new kind of pastoral care service. It was a slow and difficult struggle, due to the fact that many church leaders simply could not believe that incest, rape, physical molestation, and psychological manipulation were being practised by people of authority on church premises. The Council of Churches gave its support to the initiative, and after many years of wrestling with the problem doors were finally opened in The Netherlands, Germany and Austria to the extent that this 'secret' could become the subject around which workshops and seminars were organised'.*

*At the end of January 1999, as a member of the project group 'Religion and Incest', Jenny was able to talk about the subject during the joint synods of the SOW(=Mainline, Dutch reformed) Churches, the result being that the subject is finally open for discussion, and that those in positions of authority can learn from it. Jenny sees herself as the 'voice' at the grassroots, relating these terrible stories once again, so that the victims can come out of their isolation and at last be heard.*

# Introduction

By : Ria La Rivière

*Why have I written this book?*

Firstly, because I wanted to commit my experiences to paper as a way of coming to terms with them. Secondly, I have done it for my husband and our children, so that they will understand why I am the person I am today.

When they had all read it, they encouraged me to have it published. I did not take up the suggestion immediately because some of the contents are so intensely 'private'. Later, however, I came to the conclusion that in writing about the process I have been through, I might be able to help others.

What I divulge is deeply personal, and I alone carry the responsibility for it. They are short, restrained stories, somewhat detached at times - as if you are looking through tiny apertures at my life unfolding on a revolving stage. Each 'cameo' comes into focus independently of all the others, and just as you begin to fathom it, the next one comes into view.

In short, it is about my Christian upbringing and about my life, both of which should, in consequence, have been healing, constructive, enriching, fulfilling. But instead of that, so many of the situations I encountered were destructive and degrading - how many, I wonder?

Faith and 'the faithful' should have run like a silver thread through my life, but together they constituted a tear in the fabric of my very existence. It severed where it should have healed.

I do not pretend to have produced a work of literary excellence. But it is my story - honest and open. Hopefully, some of my readers may recognize something of themselves in it.

## 1. Hospital (1)

At the age of 7, I was cycling one day in lovely weather. And then it happened. I fell off my bike. It happened in slow motion almost. It didn't even hurt. But I had broken my thigh bone and had to stay in hospital for seven weeks. In every family, someone sooner or later breaks a limb. I was the first in my family.

*I have been in hospital for about a week. My sister is visiting me, and tells me how upset my brother-in-law (her husband) is at my being in hospital. "When you were operated on, he drove in tears around the town. You have made him very unhappy!"*

*Why does she have to tell me this? I can't help my thigh being broken.*

*He (my brother-in-law) often came alone to the hospital to see me. He was a church minister and so he was free to visit me at any time of the day when others could not. I remember that I didn't like it. I didn't feel at ease.*

When I think back on it - on how they treated me and imposed guilt feelings on me, and how they tried to suffocate me with their 'love' - I relive the same oppressive feeling I experienced then. I did not know how to react at the time - I was, after all, only seven years old. But now I know better. The word 'manipulation' did not exist for me then. I now realise that from my babyhood onwards, their presence in my life was interfering, coercive, and manipulative.

## 2. Hospital (2)

There are Sunday visiting hours too! And that's when my father came. I have happy memories of those visits, although he was sometimes too 'present' for my liking.

*I hear my father arguing with the Sister in the corridor. I don't know what it's about. I don't like it. My father, my brother-in-law and my sister always behave differently from other people.*

*Father comes into my ward and I can see that he is very angry. 'Your brother is not allowed to visit you'. Children are not allowed today. Ridiculous! Who does the Sister think she is?*

*Father is talking so loudly everyone can hear him. I wish I was invisible, that this was not happening to me.*

In the evening, the Sister came to my bed and said "Your father was rather upset about your brother not being allowed to visit you."

There I was in bed - completely immobile - with my leg raised in a kind of sling, and all I wanted to do was crawl away and hide somewhere.

I still feel fear when people argue!

## 3. The school outing

As soon as I was at school, I left my family far behind me. I said very little about home. Religion at home was very different from that taught at school. At home we were Baptists, whilst the school was Dutch Reformed. They had never heard of adult baptism there.

Most of the children at school were baptised as babies. I was probably the only one who had not been baptised in the first weeks of my life, and so I never spoke about religion at school. I had always been told that it was not good to baptise babies. I never spoke about my sister and brother-in-law either - they were already so old. I think I was ashamed of them, and ashamed of our Baptist beliefs too.

*I am in Class 4 and am going on a school outing. I am happy in my class and I am looking forward to the trip. My parents are not able to bring me. I'm disappointed! "No problem", says my brother-in-law "I'll take her". I don't want this! But how can I say it? What can I say to my girl friends if they ask who he is?*

*Maybe I can tell him not to wait for the bus to leave.*

*My brain is working overtime.*

*I am sitting in the bus. I said 'goodbye' to him quickly, and after that I paid no more attention to him.*

*We are back at school in the afternoon. And in the evening at home, I see my brother-in-law again. And, oh dear, is he mad at me! "Why didn't you wave to me when the bus left? I wasn't standing there just for the fun of it."*

*Why couldn't he just keep his mouth shut?!*

Many years later, when my children went on their school outings, I wasn't allowed to kiss them, and 'fussing' around them was strictly forbidden!

When I look back on that school trip, I have to cry, and at the same time laugh my head off at the childishness of the man. The most difficult part of it all was that he always made me feel guilty. He was my brother-in-law, and the church minister too, the proclaimer of good and bad!

## 4. Conscience

'Pricking someone's conscience' is a term we are all familiar with, and I know exactly how it works! My conscience was put to work from a very early age.

I disliked having to play with the children of friends and acquaintances from the church.

*Silly people with silly children. And I have to play with them all day long. I won't do it - I say I'm going to play with one of my girl friends somewhere else.*

*My father says : "You have to think of others too sometimes". So I play with those silly children that day.*

Once a month, a girl used to spend all day Sunday with us. Her parents lived and worked on a cargo boat. The girl was at a boarding school. My parents had promised them, as a kind of Christian duty, that "we will collect your daughter regularly on a Sunday so that she can spend the day with us."

*She is coming again this Sunday. I don't like playing with her at all. I prefer to play with my own friends, but that was not allowed.*

My parents were not really aware of it, but what they were really doing was laying their Christian duty on my shoulders.

It was then that my unhealthy sense of responsibility was born. And at ten years of age, it had become too much. And now almost 40 years later, it is often still too much.



## 5. Quarrels

In a family with children born fairly close together, it is not unusual for fierce arguments to flare up from time to time. In the family in which I grew up, however, things were rather different. My parents were 20 and 21 years of age when my sister was born, followed 12 years later by my brother, with me trailing on behind, as an 'afterthought', 8 years after that. It should be said at this point that my brother-in-law had already become part of the family before my arrival.

And because of this, the normal kind of arguments one might expect to find in the average family, did not occur in our case. Just as there was no question of discussing conflicts between parents and children.

I was about 10 years old when I became aware of the significance of conflict situations. Not that we had any really big arguments. But if we did have any angry rumblings, the usual consequence was that we did not see my sister and brother-in-law for a while. If everything was going reasonably well, we saw them on a regular basis. And then suddenly their visits stopped. A strange situation in the eyes of a small girl.

*They had not been around for some time. Very odd. I asked my mother about it yesterday. She couldn't say exactly why they were angry with us.*

*And now I'm sitting in the bus on my way to visit them. Through the tunnel to where they live in Rotterdam-South, on the other side of the city. My mother told me exactly where to get off. I'm thinking, may be things will be okay again.*

*My sister is waiting for me at the bus stop and is happy to see me. We walk to their house and my brother-in-law is there. Strange that I always feel a little bit 'different' in their company. I'm not myself!*

*I feel caught between two fires. My parents at home, and my sister and brother-in-law here. My brother-in-law asks: "Have your father and mother been talking about us?". I reply "No, not at all!" But he continues to ask awkward questions. Help! What I am to do?!*

When I think back on this, I feel the stifling atmosphere once again. It is disgraceful for an adult to use a child of 10 years old as a buffer in his conflict with someone else. It's as if you are expected to possess the adaptation skills of a chameleon. I have the feeling that it was then that the manipulation, the being 'worked-on', became an integral part of my life.

## 6. Sharing a house

It was Sunday. After church we, my father, mother and I, went to my sister and brother-in-law's house for a cup of coffee. My sister apparently had some kind of problem. They lived in a large house, the lower floor of which they rented to a young newly-married couple. How kind of the minister. But there were difficulties!!

*My sister is crying and is very upset. I just listen. The couple downstairs were initially the most wonderful people on earth, and now they are the worst villains you could possibly imagine.*

*I've heard this kind of story before, 'typical of my sister and her husband'. It's always the same with them. My parents listen calmly, and mother says "You'd better come with us."*

*And, yes, they did come with us - my sister with a pan of peeled potatoes on her lap - never to return to that house again. My sister was near to breaking point, and for that reason stayed with us for many, too many, months.*

My parent's house had three bedrooms. One for my parents, one for my 21 year old brother, and one for me - and I was 12.

No one ever talked about the limited space we had. My sister and brother-in-law slept all those months on a folding bed in my room. The room measured 3 x 2.5 metres, with the beds very close together.

I have no memories of that time. I try to bring it back to mind but can't, so successfully have I suppressed it.

There is one lasting memory, however. I was in bed pretending to be asleep. My sister (32 years) and my brother-in-law (34 years) were talking together in their bed. They were talking about my parents, and

about what was not right in our house. And I can remember not wanting to hear it, but not having the courage, on the other hand, to say : "stop, I can hear you."

What was so strange was that their living in our house, and their sleeping in my bedroom, was accepted without question, whilst all the time they had a house of their own.

## 7. The ladder

Because the age differences were so great in our home, anything I did was noticed, and a very close eye was kept on me and my friends.

I was in Class 1 at the Secondary School; I was 12 years of age. A number of my girl friends and I used to meet together on a Saturday evening. In turn at one of our homes.

*I feel nervous. They are all coming to my room this time. I am hoping we will have a good time together in my home. I'm hoping too that my brother will not say anything. He has already made several remarks about the evening.*

*It has gone well. We are all sitting in my room. Strange though, that I cannot really relax. I feel much more at ease at one of my friends' homes.*

*After about an hour, I hear someone laughing outside. I look through the window, and to my amazement I see that my brother has placed a ladder against the wall and is making his way up to my room. My friends join me at the window and are loving it. Not everyone has a 20 year old brother. And then he pokes his head through the open window.*

*I feel angry, unhappy, hurt. Outside, at the foot of the ladder, my mother and my 32 year old sister, are screaming with laughter. Everyone is having fun. My brother playing the chief clown, followed by my mother, my sister, and my friends too. But I'm not laughing. I'm feeling very fed-up, although I can't allow myself to show it, and will never allow myself to show it. I couldn't spoil their fun now, could I?*

Now that I have put this to paper, I realise just how annoying and banal

the whole incident was. And how awful that, as a 12 year old, I had no way of defending myself. I had no choice but to be a part of it, and pretend that I was also very amused by my brother's antics; my brother fooling around on the ladder!

But there was no respect for my feelings, or those of my group of 12 year old friends. And that too had to be ridiculed.

## 8. Meddling

The end of the 1950s were important times for the Christian world. The well-known American evangelist Billy Graham came to The Netherlands, and was followed in 1958 by the faith healer T.L. Osborn.

It created a need for evangelization-events to be organised in many churches throughout the country.

So too within the Youth For Christ movement. I can remember attending a huge gathering in the Riviera Hall in Rotterdam in 1959.

The gathering was called a 'Youth Rally' at the time. The programme started with community singing, led by John Buurman, accompanied on the electronic organ by Hans v.d. Steen, and Frans v.d. Reyden on piano. The whole congregation joined together in singing hymns by Johannes de Heer. Lots of singing followed by frequent repetitions of the refrain. Someone came to the platform to give witness - and then there was the sermon - followed by the open invitation to come to God.

*I am 13 years old. We have come with the youth group and, needless to say, my sister and Baptist minister brother-in-law, are there too; he is sitting behind me. The sermon has ended, and the invitation to come to the Lord is given. The organ and the piano are playing softly. People are making their way to the front of the hall. The invitation is almost over (I hope). My brother-in-law taps me on my shoulder, I turn towards him and he says, with a penetrating voice : "Is the road too long for you? It's meant for you too, you know!"*

I am scared out of my wits. My heart is pounding. My mind, my soul, my heart are apparently an open book. I don't know what to say!

Even now, after more than 40 years, I am still put out by the dreadful

meddling of that man. It is a crime to manipulate the mind, soul and heart of another.

At the time, I had little choice but to accept his interference, because it had become so 'normal' in my life for my mind, my soul and my heart to be an open book. And this despite the fact that it is far more normal for a 13 year old adolescent to want to be a closed book, and to be given the time and space to think things through clearly.

## 9. The film

From time to time, it was customary for the family to do something together, outside of the home.

In our case, it was always something different from what other children of my age would usually do. This was because of the wide age differences in our family.

A new cinema had recently opened (Cinerama), with a very wide screen; one had the impression of sitting in the middle of it. The film then showing was 'Grimm's Fairy Tales'.

*At the age of 13, I am getting very excited in anticipation of this event. I am crazy about anything to do with films, especially if they are romantic.*

*The film opens and I begin to fantasize that I am playing the leading role. I am completely enthralled by all those images as they pass before my eyes. My brother-in-law is sitting beside me. We both watch the film in silence - until the scene in which a boy and girl are dancing together.*

*The dancing is lovely to see, and it makes me want to dance too, to be light on my feet, drifting above the ground, so romantic. I am in dreamland! My 35 year old brother-in-law sitting beside me, nudges my arm. I look at him, and he leans his head towards me and whispers : "Do you know what they are expressing?". I say "No" (thinking 'why doesn't he just shut up!'), to which he replies "They are acting out sexual intercourse."*

And in one second, all the innocence of youth was gone - he had destroyed it for all time in me. Why? What was the point of whispering that to me?

## 10. The dancing lesson

When I was 13, I began to ask my parents if I could go to dancing classes. My mother was fairly non-committal, and delayed any decision on the grounds that I was still too young. My father did not want it at all.

I can remember the fierce discussion I had with my parents. My friend was there and, of course, my sister and brother-in-law too. I think I was almost 14 then, and I knew it was possible to start dancing classes at 14. And I wanted it so badly.

*"She's allowed to go to dancing lessons, so I can too. Please Ma, please Pa. I really want it." I see my mother almost succumbing, but father is still resisting. I feel hopeful. I think I will get what I want.*

*Baptist minister brother-in-law : "Father and mother - there is no way I would agree to this." Of course, he had to interfere again. Why are they here, for goodness sake! Father, please don't listen to him. To my sorrow, my father announces : "No, I will not allow it."*

Thanks then to minister brother-in-law, I never attended dancing lessons, not even when I reached adulthood and could make my own decisions. I even rejected it completely, at one stage. Until I was 40, in fact, when I was free at last to ask myself all kinds of questions. And, yes, Leen (my husband) and I finally started dancing lessons together.

I cannot describe just what an emotional impact those dancing lessons had on me. And the anger it provoked in me. Why was I not allowed to do this when I was young? And why was I so compliant all those years?

They amount, in fact, to burdens being imposed on a young person; it was as if a curse had been put on me, and from which I have literally had to wrench myself free.

It is also quite ridiculous that my sister and her husband were allowed to interfere in this, and other internal family matters, and that they were always present during private family discussions.

## 11. The church

The church which my parents and I attended, is an old building overlooking the old harbour in Schiedam. A small hallway, stairs, a narrow passage, an old kitchen; at the end of the passage, a room in which church minister brother-in-law prays with the 'brothers' (church council), before the service begins. The passage leads into a large room, in which the most attractive item is a large copper chandelier. The room is austere, very austere. There's nothing pleasing about it.

There is a youth evening every Saturday : for the age group 15-25. And if you are not married at 28, you can still come to it. I am not yet 14, but there are so few teenagers, that I am allowed to attend! Or, in other words, MUST attend!

We sit in a circle, the point being that we should all be able to see each other. Hymns are sung and church minister brother-in-law is always there, for the Bible study session.

*Sometimes he asks a question and I never know how to answer it! I have not yet made a commitment. I don't actually belong because I still have to 'submit' (that's the term they use when you have not yet been converted).*

*But, 'do you actually have a free choice? The 'church people' around me tell me that I have to make a choice, but what kind of choice can I - a teenager - actually make?'*

It was my family, my church, my friends, my life. Of course I was attracted by anything real! But the lack of freedom, the manipulation, and the group control, quickly turned me off.

And even now, sitting in a bible-reading and prayer circle, remains a problem for me.

## 12. The choice

We have distributed the leaflets, inviting people to come to our evangelization youth gathering. And I was part of it! Very exciting! How many people would come? It is almost 8 o'clock in the evening. I have seen everyone present before. There are no new faces among them. And we have distributed so many invitations. What has happened?

The preacher does his very best. A large, heavy-set, impressive man. He talks at us, rather than with us. He tells us how important it is to choose for Jesus. We pray together. He asks us to raise our hands "if you want to choose for Jesus". I peep out of the corner of my eye. It is very quiet. Everyone looks tense, and my heart is pounding somewhere in my throat. Hands are raised. Five certainly, including some belonging to young people who had attended some of the earlier Youth evenings. I ought to be putting my hand up too, but courage fails me. The service has come to an end. The atmosphere is strangely tense. My friends have chosen for Jesus, but I haven't, not yet.

My church minister brother-in-law drives me home with my friend. My brother-in-law is so enthusiastic, so "blessed". And what a wonderful result!

*I start to cry. Brother-in-law is talking again : "Do you want to give your life too? Do you also want to take the step?" My friend begins to cry too now and says "yes". And I also say "yes". He takes us home, to his small study. We sit together, almost knee-to-knee. Brother-in-law is very moved. He begins to pray and we (my friend and I) have to pray after him.*

His physical presence was too close; the atmosphere was one of tense emotion. You had no choice. Looking back, it is clear that we crossed

the dividing line between authenticity and manipulation.

I do believe, nonetheless, that I really meant what I said. But I am disturbed by what surrounded it, the playing on someone's feelings, the emotional approach - is it all right to do that to a girl of 14?

## 13. The assignment

I am walking home! My sister has already telephoned my parents. Ria has been converted. I arrive home. More tears! Father and mother embrace me and are happy.

Thank God, their child has been saved, cannot be harmed and will have her place in Heaven.

My brother and sister-in-law are there too. They look shocked.

They have not yet been converted! They don't know what to say.

A kind of obsession begins to grow in me that day : my brother and sister-in-law must also be brought to the faith. It has become my greatest wish. And every day, it becomes what I would almost call the 'unhealthy mission' of my life. Pray, pray and pray again for their conversion!

I thought at the time how noble my intentions were. But I was no longer able, as part of a family, to enjoy my brother and sister, or find any pleasure in family life itself.

How unjust to look at your family purely in terms of whether or not they share 'the faith'. All we have to do is love each other.

## 14. Door-to-door selling

The term 'Mobile Pulpit' was coined because church minister brother-in-law had answered the call to evangelize. At the end of the 1950s, in the wake of the great Billy Graham campaign in The Netherlands, brother-in-law longed to bring the Gospel to people. He does that initially with another minister; large loudspeakers are thus placed on the roof of a car, and Christian texts and music are broadcast to the public. They are at it 4 mornings a week : with 5 people in the car to the south Holland islands, and whilst they drive slowly through the streets, they ring the doorbells of every house in turn, and asking anyone who opens the door : "Would you like to buy a copy of this evangelical magazine?"

When I was working at the evangelisation office, I was expected to join the group if there were not enough people available to fill the car.

*'I hope there will be enough people today! If there are too few, it will be my turn again. And I hate it! I can't ever say it out loud, though. I just think it. And even that is not allowed. I should be enjoying it. To bring people in touch with the Gospels.'*

It was a large, grey, English station-wagon, with red leather seats. I also remember a campaign held in Rotterdam. Large boards were fixed to the car, with the text RETURN TO GOD displayed in big letters on them.

We drove through the whole of Rotterdam inviting people to come to our gathering.

*'Be not ashamed of the Gospels' the Bible says. But I was very ashamed.*

Looking back, my resistance was expressed, once I had stepped into the car, in the simple act of falling asleep!



## 15. The prayer meeting

When you are 16 or 17 years old, lying-in on your days off is the best thing there is.

For me too.

But, how do my Saturday mornings begin?

I get up at 7 a.m.

I dress quickly so that I can attend the Prayer Meeting with my father.

At 7.30 a.m. in the Noordsingel in Rotterdam, in a basement known as 'The Mobile Pulpit Basement'.

The room is always rather damp, to such an extent that fungi grew on its walls. On Saturday mornings, it is mostly older men with serious morning faces, who come together to pray.

I have never understood why it had to be so early. I had the feeling, nonetheless, that I ought to be there. That 'The Lord' approved'. And that He listened better in the morning.

*I prefer to sit close to the fire, especially in the winter. The meeting opens with a Bible reading, and after that the prayers begin.*

*I do my best to listen, but those endless prayers take up so much time. All those serious-looking men telling Our Lord what He should do.*

*I haven't the courage to pray. The minister often cautions me about it.*

*I feel so sleepy. I keep dropping off, and every time someone nudges me. I wake up startled. And am so happy, because the prayer meeting is over!*

When my children were 16 or 17 years old, they were allowed to enjoy life and sleep through on their days off.

When I look at them, I realise now after so many years, just how young I was when I sat in that unwelcoming basement on those cold winter mornings.

## 16. Never good enough!!

He is small and stocky, has dark hair and a strong presence. He makes a deep impression on me. A new preacher.

My brother-in-law came in contact with him through others. A campaign has been organised, 4 evenings on which this man will preach.

*His words are extremely penetrating, he is talking about 'your offer of Isaac'. What does he mean? I can remember the story in the Bible about Abraham being brought almost to the point of offering up his son Isaac to God.*

*What kind of Isaacs are there in my life? I am 15 years old. I feel very restless. My heart is pounding. The organ and the piano play softly as the preacher invites you to come forward and bring your Isaac to the Lord.*

*What kind of Isaac do I have? "It can even be a chocolate Isaac" he says. Many people make their way to the front. I know several of them. I'll have to go too. But, why? I must! "If you are, or feel, restless, then you must come", he says again. I go!*

*He preaches again the next evening. I feel less restless. I went to the front yesterday. There is no need to go again today. How strange, I feel restless again as he gives me invitation. I feel I have to go forward again. There is so much that is not good in, and about, me.*

This period is followed by several years of uncertainty about whether or not I am good enough for the Lord. And it meant that I went to the front of the congregation during many, many, of those meetings.

I did then, in all sincerity, what I thought I had to do. And now I see that I was just a child. And despite all the good intentions, this kind of

intimidating preaching, was nothing less than manipulation. Regrettably, moments like these have meant that to this day I have remained uncertain and unsure of myself.

## 17. Going out

My parents owned a market garden in partnership with my aunt and uncle. My brother and I were still living at home. My aunt and uncle's three children lived in the grounds too, together with their families and children. And my parents also gave my sister and brother-in-law a small house there too. This gathering-of-the-clans in one area had all the ingredients of a 'soap-opera', but a Christian one, of course, devoid of any glitter and glamour.

Going out for entertainment as teenagers do today, is very different from what it was 30 years ago. In Rotterdam you could go dancing at the Bristol or the Rutecks, for instance, and there were many more such establishments.

I used to fantasize in my dreams about going out.  
And even then, I felt guilty. It was not done for young Christian girls to go out like this.

From the age of 13, I was allowed to attend the Youth group in our Church, on a Saturday evening. My brother-in-law was in charge of it. Looking back, they were hardly creative evenings. We sat in a circle in an unpleasant room, we sang hymns and discussed the Bible.

I didn't mind it too much at the time. I knew no better. They were, after all, my friends who joined me in the singing and listened to my brother-in-law, the minister.

*I wanted to go home with the others in the group.  
They always go home together. But I always have to go with my sister and brother-in-law in their car. They think that's quite normal. They take me home - they live next door to us. I wish I could get out of this.*

Strange how difficult it was to say 'no' to them.  
But Hallelujah!!! The moment came!

I was 16 and we had a good friend of mine and my parents staying with us. He was 25 years old and also came to the youth evenings. This was my chance.

This friend had a car. And my problem, therefore, was solved. I told my sister and brother-in-law that I would not be going with them after the Youth evening. I would be going with this friend. They were not very pleased.

It went well for several weeks. No one made any comments about it.

*He is a good friend. I feel safe with him. His taking me home was fantastic!*

*It is warm and cosy in the car. It is late. No problem for my parents. They have already gone to bed. We take the lower road home. "Look, my brother-in-law is at the window.*

*You'd think he was keeping watch to see if I arrive home safely."*

*It is Sunday and, naturally, we go to church. We always arrive there earlier than the rest of the congregation. My brother-in-law (the minister) comes towards me. He has an angry expression on his face. It makes me feel afraid. What have I done now?*

*He says to me : "That will not happen again, coming home so late and with him. He can't be trusted. I will not have it, do you hear? I will not have it."*

I felt bad. Only I was not sure why. I had done nothing. Absolutely nothing. And neither had the friend!

My brother (then 24 years old) heard this and whispered cynically into my ear : "Bad Girl". We used to poke fun and make all sorts of jokes about by brother-in-law. But my brother never participated. He was, I think, also afraid of this brother-in-law, who apparently had so much "power and authority".

## 18. Criticism

No one escapes criticism at some time or other in our house. Everyone is talked about -their outward appearance, their inner self, their religious life, their work, marriage - indeed, everything.

I grew up with this. At home, we were both critical and cynical. Our criticism was levelled particularly at the people attending my brother-in-law's church, and to which we also belonged.

It's very odd, I know, but you get used to this, and you even begin to regard it as normal. I did discover, however, that the people under discussion were first of all praised to the heavens, and after that torn to shreds, so that the only place left for them was Hell.

The pity of it is : negative comments take root in one's mind.

In my teenage years, I took many boys and girls home with me. They were my friends.

Our house was certainly full after church. And we were often joined by brother-in-law (the minister) and my sister. Initially, it all went well, but as soon as a boy or girl made repeated visits, the trouble began. Although my parents listened to the comments (of my sister and brother-in-law), they fortunately remained as friendly as ever towards my friends.

For 4 boys visiting us, the criticism was almost damning. They were good for nothings, weaklings, the most useless figures on earth, and with no sense of responsibility.

*It is a total mystery to me why my sister and brother-in-law were always so CRITICAL of others. And why did they involve me in it? I was forced to listen to it, time and again.*

*It was brainwashing.*

*Criticism was never voiced directly to the people concerned, although tiny pin-pricks were given from time to time. And my open acceptance of my friends, for what they were, evaporated.*

That critical atmosphere turned into a deadly poison in me. Fortunately, the criticism directed to the 4 boys has not destroyed them. They are now 30 years on, and all four of them have developed a strong sense of responsibility towards their work and their families.

## 19. Hair buns

To Switzerland for a holiday. I am allowed to join my sister and brother-in-law. But, first of all, we visit the 'chocolate Isaac' preacher. He and his family lived in a lovely house and because they had several children, it was fun to be there.

During the few days of our stay, I discovered several ridiculous things. From an early age, I have been mad about make-up, although I wore no make-up on this holiday of course. That was 'not good'.

*'She uses lipstick. I saw it myself. 'No she doesn't, she's not allowed to', says my sister. We are in the car together. She colours her lips with pink lipstick! 'Nice colour', I say. 'This is not lipstick, this is for chapped lips', she says. Silly woman, why does she have to lie about it?!*

There is a prayer meeting in the evening with their Bible group and helpers. I have long hair down to my shoulders. We go to the prayer meeting together. No problem, I am quite used to prayer meetings.

*She comes towards me. Would you like to do something for us? I reply innocently, 'yes'. Would you mind putting your hair up? I say : "In a bun? Why?"*

I think it's ridiculous. I had seen it already on all those women. Some had short hair but with more luck than skill, plus dozens of hair clips, they had managed to create a kind of bun at the back of their heads. But surely in the Bible St. Paul has something to say about long hair for women?

*I am angry deep inside me, but what can I, as a 16 year old, do against such a bulwark? I arrange my hair in a bun.*

All my life I have had to endure comment and grumbling about my clothes and hair. But after this, I refused to take any more notice of it.

## 20. Intimidating sermons

A crowded church. A wide variety of ages. In the early 1960s, all kinds of evangelization gatherings were held in various places in The Netherlands.

A well-known preacher from abroad had been invited to speak, and the announcement drew large crowds of people.

Christians did not go to the theatre or the cinema, etc. But this kind of gathering with plenty of singing, accompanied by piano and electronic organ, worked well.

*I am home again after the Swiss holiday, and am fairly tanned. Would he be there too? I haven't seen him for three weeks. I hope he sees me.*

These gatherings also served the needs of boys and girls to meet. It was impressed on us from an early age, however : 'Don't fall in love with a non-Christian, because God would not want that.'

*I keep to that!  
But I am young and mad about boys, and 'boy-watching' is what I enjoy, here too.*

*The singing starts. Lots and lots of singing. Actually, the hymns are quite nice. I enjoy singing and am happy to give it everything I've got.*

*It is about 9 a.m. and the sermon begins, with the help of an interpreter. Very insistent about conversion and witness. He preaches for at least 45 minutes. And then the music takes over in soft tones, and the invitation to come forward is extended.*

The invitation implies that you can become a believer, or that you can dedicate your life 100% to the Lord, or that you are prepared to

devote your life to the church's mission work.

*That invitation is making me rather nervous. He has been at it for at least 30 minutes and no one has come forward. Why does he keep ranting on? Why doesn't he stop? If he doesn't stop within the next 10 minutes, I am going to go forward - perhaps that will stop him.*

Fortunately, it wasn't necessary, because he did stop after about 10 minutes. I still feel the tightness at the back of my throat that always accompanied those invitations.

When I look back on it now, it seems almost like a farce. My feelings are so ambivalent as I sit there. On the one hand, boys are so important to me, and on occasions like these I am allowed to watch them.

And on the other hand, I'm wrestling with heavy-weight matters such as : How do you see life, God, Jesus Christ, your sacrifice for Christian mission, etc.?

What I cannot understand, looking back - either for myself, or for others - is that we continued to accept everything without question.

## 21. The group within the group (1)

They always came in as a group. The big chief in front. She was small. A kind of 'Akela' of the Scouts.

She was married to a taxi driver, a pleasant man, older than she. Difficult to understand why these two people were married to each other.

The group included two other couples, an engaged couple and three or four single people. They were just like an army, very disciplined, with a general at the head.

They were always received with open arms by the minister. They were present at every prayer meeting, every bible study session, every meeting; they were there too for the door-to-door selling of the magazine, for every evangelization campaign, and they also gave generous contributions.

*They always look half asleep to me. They always pray the same kind of prayer too. Things like : 'Plumb my depths and know me Lord'. There is something about them I don't really like. But who am I to say that, a mere 16 years old?*

*I can remember saying to one of the group, when we were talking about dressmaking : "I get very nervous when it doesn't go right", to which she replies "Oh no, I have no problem with that. I leave it all to the Lord."*

*It came out a year later, that the members of the group, if they were not prepared to listen to authority, were segregated from the rest and forced to remain in their rooms. And married couples were then forbidden to sleep together.*

*The group applied concentration camp methods.*

*My parents protested against this at the time. But the minister was unwilling to forego their contributions and their active involvement.*

And now, after more than 30 years, someone has had the courage to talk about this sect on television.

It's awful to think that my parents did not take a firmer stand at the time. And I was again too young. The only thing I could do, was to leave the church they attended. My brother-in-law's church, the minister's church.

## 22. The group (2)

We are on duty in the tent, where once again another evangelization gathering is to take place.

The tent has been erected in south Rotterdam. My brother is there too, as also the 'group general' with another follower. She never comes alone. The group treats her with great respect.

We talk together. A young man of between 20 and 25 years, comes in. He asks us what kind of Evangelization this is. Oh dear, I wish he hadn't asked.

*She begins to speak. Persuasive and well articulated. Without stopping. My 24 year old brother says nothing, and I - with my 16 years - also say nothing. We listen and think to ourselves 'please, please stop'. But we do nothing to stop it, because we can't stop it.*

Try to imagine it; four people against one man. A man who simply asks questions, and is friendly and polite. Two silent onlookers and that 'talking-head' of a woman boring into you with that awful 'we know it all, and you poor creature know nothing, absolutely nothing.'

This is just one example, and how often do you still meet this kind of brain-washing in gatherings like these?

## 23. Leaving the job

At the end of the 1950s, brother-in-law, the Baptist minister, embarked on inter-church Christian evangelization work under the scintillating name of 'The Mobile Pulpit'. Once referred to by a loving sister during a prayer as 'The Mobile Beating' (a fitting Freudian slip-of-the-tongue : N.B. pulpit in Dutch = kansel, and beating = ransel).

I had a job in a shop selling exclusive fashions, offering me high prospects in the fashion design world.

At the same time, my brother-in-law opened an office, started to publish a magazine, and was looking for administrative assistance. He decided to put pressure on me. And I said 'yes'. I started to work for him at the age of 16.

I enjoyed it at first, plenty of work and lots of variety. What was particularly pleasing about the work, was the number of volunteers it attracted. There was always enough work for everyone.

My best friend used to come by every day after school. And after a few months, she joined us fulltime. It only became apparent 20 years later, just how tragic that would turn out to be.

As I said, the first year was fine. My friend and I had great fun together, and it was we who set the tone. But things changed. I don't know why exactly. But I do know that my brother-in-law started to keep a watchful eye on us. And for what reason?

*"Your eyes look glazed, look at me straight in the eye." What in heaven's name did he mean by that? It is driving us crazy! 'The eye mirrors the soul'. Yes, I know that. I do not want to listen to that man.*

And, naturally, my friend and I crack jokes about it all the time. But it unsettles us all the same.

We'll leave! We'll resign. We talk together about how and when we will do it. We are going to talk to our parents about it.

We are so afraid to tell him!  
But we will have to!

I can remember it so well! It was a Saturday, I had telephoned him to make an appointment.

*Our nerves are killing us, and we decide first of all to have some sleep so that we can calm down a bit.*

His study is small, there is just room for the three of us. He realises that something is afoot. I start. And I break out in a cold sweat. I say : "I want to leave, I resign." He stares at me with those piercing eyes of his. And then he asks my friend : "And what about you, are you going too?" "Yes" she says. And then he announces with all the authority he can muster : "And are you certain that this is God's will?"

*The shock of it numbs me for a moment. I really have no idea whether or not God wants it. I cannot lie. I only know that I want, and must, leave. I say "Yes".  
I can't remember what he said then.*

I felt excluded, rejected. I was 17, and my friend was 16. My brother-in-law was 39.

This proved to be one of the most profound decisions of my life. Imagine if I had stayed, what would have become of me?

## 24. The tent

In taking leave of my brother-in-law's (the minister's) evangelization work and 'The Mobile Pulpit', I also stopped going to his church. I had to look for another job, another church, other friends.

A large tent has been erected at the Weena in Rotterdam. An Evangelical is preaching about conversion and the healing of the sick. I am curious and feel alone. I want to meet new friends. I therefore make my way into the tent. It is crammed full. There is much singing and clapping of hands. People rise to their feet and wave their arms high. Everyone is very enthusiastic and their conviction strong. It both draws me and repels me. Highly ambivalent!

There is a nice young man standing behind the book table. (Unfortunately he was not from Rotterdam). I visit the tent every evening, for seven days. That was July 1964. I was involved with this movement right up to 1984, and attended all kinds of gatherings very like those held in the tent. I found new friends, and learned a lot. But I still came regularly face-to-face here with manipulation and macho-attitudes.

Isn't it strange that faith failed to bring things together, but that division was more likely to be caused by 'believers'?

It was those so-called believers who, again and again, ripped the very fabric of my life.



## 25. Pearls

'Going out onto the streets' had become accepted practice by the 1960s and early 1970s. Young people with guitars sang cheerful songs - that was new, that had never been seen before. They talked with great conviction about their beliefs. It was the time of 'Flower Power', LSD, Vietnam, open debate, freedom. And this was part of it.

When my parents, my brother and sister-in-law, and I (18 years old) joined the movement, we became very active members indeed. There were weeks when we walked the streets every evening 'giving witness'. There were many witnesses now who could be very convincing. And those who, on those evenings, had won 'souls for the Kingdom' (as it was called).

At the end of those evenings, they asked each other how many 'pearls' (i.e. 'souls') they had won. It became a kind of competition between them. Who had won the most!

*I never succeeded. I was never able to win a 'pearl'.  
Why is that, what am I doing wrong?*

Perhaps I was not 'meant' to win any 'pearls'.

And, fortunately, I have no lingering frustrations about it. It was painful at the time though. And today I say : what on earth did we think we were doing?!

## 26. Discrimination

It was August 1966. The conference centre was called 'De Dikkenberg', and in its extensive grounds, it brought some 300 people together for a Bible course.

It was led by an older couple, who in the 1950s had developed entirely new insights into the Bible.

*There were Bible studies every morning from 9-12, and in the afternoons from 2-4, followed by a sermon and community singing in the evening.*

*There he is again! Every day he spends his time calmly drawing, with his father on one side and his mother on the other. He keeps at it, hour after hour! I can't help noticing this boy. He sits there every day, so sweet, almost beautiful. I feel fondness for this boy, this Down's syndrome child.*

*At the end of the course, a blessing is pronounced over each of the 300 people in turn. It was the custom at these courses.*

*'It's my turn this evening. Together with that couple and their Down's syndrome son.' They are already waiting in line. But, hey, what is happening on the platform? The leader of the course is talking agitatedly to the parents of my friend, the boy with Down's syndrome. Something dreadful and unjust, yes discriminating, is taking place. The parents leave the platform with their son. He doesn't understand. He looks so sad. For him there is no blessing!*

I can still see the leader's face, the indignation contained in "that boy doesn't belong here".

When I relive that scene in my mind, I feel a party to the guilt it

represented. I just stood there and did nothing.

No one reacted!!

After so many years, I have never forgotten it. Why didn't I do something?

This religious movement preached that it Proclaimed the True Faith.

But it did not know what to do with the weak, the poor in spirit. They simply did not belong. It is comforting to know that Our Dear Lord has very different ideas about that.

## 27. Being pure

From the age of 15 to 21, I assisted at many large-scale tent campaigns with numerous tent-evangelists in Rotterdam, and several other places too.

After nearly every sermon, people were given the opportunity to 'come forward'. This was more or less the high point of the preaching. And then came what was known as 'the invitation'.

The organ played softly. The preacher began to invite people to come to the Faith. (In some circles, this was known as 'Submitting'.)

If no one came forward, the preacher invited you to give yourself 100% again, or to stop smoking, or to cease your secret sin, or your bad thoughts and actions.

And then the people came forward, boys and men especially, for their bad thoughts and actions!!

The preacher made it very clear to them that sexual thoughts, and bad acts such as masturbation, were very sinful. Prayers were said for them!!

No wonder then that a week later, the same men and women came forward, each of them bearing an even greater guilt complex!

Sex was always talked about in sermons and Bible studies in very guarded terms. Things are somewhat more open today. I know from experience, however, that if you talk about sex openly, church leaders do not approve. And this is certainly true when it comes to masturbation. In their view, sex is only permissible within marriage.

'I still hear the slogans in my ears, my head, my body.'

'No flirting, just witness.'

'It is wonderful to be pure.'

'Stir not up nor awaken love until it please.'

'Thou shalt not follow the majority in their evil ways.'  
Have these slogans been of any help to 'me and them'?

Masturbation, why were people so afraid of it?  
Why was it not explained properly, that it is all right?

## 28. Fire

In the 1960s, the youth group to which I belonged, used to sing together on the streets and to 'give witness', as they called it. Witness meant trying to convince people that they needed to convert.

We were somewhere in the centre of Amsterdam, close to a busy shopping area.

One of the hymns sung with great gusto was 'Send down the fire' (read : Holy Spirit).

To everyone's dismay, the whole shopping centre burned to the ground.

The comment of the youth group after that was : 'There you are, God answers with fire.'

Another inappropriate joke.

## 29. Interference

As soon as you profess your faith, people from the church community start meddling in your affairs. It can be good and it can be positive. Certainly at the start. People surround you with care, love, time. Nothing is too much for them.

Having caring people around you is nice, but when it becomes more a question of meddling or of intolerance, then it becomes very negative.

People have always interfered in my life.

We were so in love and decided we would get engaged, we were both active in the same religious movement and I thought, very naively, that everyone would be delighted we had found each other. Reactions from inside the movement :

The 1st reaction came from one of my closest female friends.

*'He is not the right man for you! He's no good.'*

The 2nd reaction.

*'My employer didn't look at him, was even very cool towards me for several days.'*

The 3rd reaction.

*'My minister, who even had the gall to go to my parents and say to them : 'that boy is not the right partner for your daughter.'*

All these people were members of the same religious movement.

Whatever possessed them to think they should issue a warning not only to me, but to my parents as well?

How dared they?!!

And to crown it all : the evangelist who was going to lead our wedding service, got it into his head to indulge in an argument with us up to 5 minutes before the service was due to begin, because he didn't want to comply with our wishes regarding the service, but wanted instead to do his 'own service'.

We have been together now for more than 30 years. Their meddlesome behaviour was, therefore, unnecessary. Our marriage has survived and the dynamism within it grows.

I feel pain, a great deal of pain, when I think back on that terrible interference.

As a result of that meddling, I often saw my partner through their eyes during the first years of our marriage.

## 30. Group jargon

If you are a child and you grow up within a certain faith, you are not aware that a specific 'language', develops within in. I grew up in a Baptist Community. You were not allowed to use the word 'church'. That term belonged to the traditional churches.

Our family was thus part of a 'community'. The only word I remember from that time is 'surrender'.

Later when I joined the Evangelical/Pentecostal/Charismatic movement, I discovered that every movement had its own 'language'. At that time, it was known as the 'Canaan' language. I would be more inclined now to call it pious jargon.

There were slogans like :

'The feast goes on'.

'To stand in the victory'.

'Hallelujah'. (*Repeated several times after every sentence.*)

'Praise the Lord!'. (*Appropriately and inappropriately.*)

'Amen'

'Give your heart to the Lord' (= *entrust yourself completely to God*)

These words were used by certain movements with which I was intensely involved for several years of my life.

It was all part of the experience of faith. If you didn't use their language, you lacked credibility in their eyes.

And now after 20 years or more, other communities/movements have emerged, and they also use language understandable to themselves, but largely meaningless to outsiders. I recently came across :

'An explosion of praise'

'Find the heart of God'

'The core of His presence'

'Father-heart of God'.

Once a man or woman has become a believer, he or she is likely to start using these terms within the space of about two weeks. Converts become part of a group, and in so doing, often alienate themselves from society at large.

Did I understand this language? Now that I put it to paper again, it seems so distant, so incomprehensible.

I didn't use 'the language'. I was, therefore, less credible. And that is still the case sometimes today.

## 31. Cures

My father was asked by the minister to go with him to a woman suffering from terminal cancer. The minister prayed out loud at her bedside for healing! When he was done and they drove home, my father asked : 'do you think she will get better?'. 'No' said the preacher, 'she will die'. Why then pray for healing?! Why not help her to prepare for death?

Years ago, we took our company paperwork for printing to a printing firm, the owners of which we had got to know quite well. One day, the woman told us she had cancer. And she managed her life fairly well with this illness for some years. Until she became terminally ill and the end was near. When she was no longer able to leave her bed, she telephoned my husband and asked him if he would come and talk to her about faith, God and heaven/life hereafter. My husband visited her on several occasions and they talked together about life after death. They were precious moments both for her and for my husband. We told my father-in-law about it. And to our astonishment, he replied : 'But you should be praying for a cure'. We could not make him understand at the time, that we did not want to add confusion to her process of accepting the inevitable with a peaceful heart. And for us that meant, coming to terms with death! This example of terminal care was both sad and beautiful.

I do not reject the possibility of God's power to heal, but all those untruths, half truths and pure deceit surrounding it .....

I regret not ever again being able to listen with an unquestioning mind, when someone relates to me a story of healing.

## 32. Bloopers

During meetings people sometimes said things in the heat of the moment, that they did not actually mean. I have collected a few through the years, plus a number of other curious incidents.

'Lord, it is 9.15 a.m. and I lay myself on the altar'. (Can you imagine him lying on that altar?)

'Lord, will you bless the work of the Mobile Beating (= 'Ransel' in Dutch).' (He meant 'Mobile Pulpit' = 'Kansel' in Dutch).

'Lord, release a great wind.' (This was a very odd thing to say, when the intention was : 'Send the breath of the Holy Spirit down on us.')

'Lord, you are a liar'. (This should have been : 'Satan you are a liar')

'I used to go to Snackbars (so you were a great sinner), but am now converted.'

'If you want intercourse, come to our meeting.' (Someone actually did come in search of the ladies.)

'Lord, give us the water of life.' (At which point the minister knocked his glass of water into the congregation as he held forth, full of fire.)

The whole congregation came as one man 'To the Lord'. But there was only one person who came forward at that meeting (the only person present at that meeting).

Christian drug-addiction care first started in the 1960s. We interviewed the first would-be project leader in 1967. And, what did we hear? He had never made any investigation of drugs or drug addiction. He didn't see that as a problem, however, because he believed in Jesus Christ and He would tell him what he needed to know. (Needless to

say, the matter ended there.)

There was an evangelization-car, known as the mobile-unit. Two people could borrow the car for a week. A film-projector + screen + film, were all included. Leaflets were distributed during the day in each new area, and the film was shown in the village square in the evening. In itself, a very creative event in the 1960s. I remember two very fanatical men returning from one of those weeks. What a blessing, what a revival - 250 souls had been saved! And it turned out that they were children! Children who probably had no idea what they were doing.

My father was asked to visit a local family, because ..... there was an evil spirit in their clock! The cuckoo couldn't stop calling .....

Statements uttered by a well-known Evangelist : Violin music is the music of heaven and the angels. Saxophone music is the music of the devil and hell.

The speaker referred to TV as Hellelevision, and it would be better not to have a TV in the home. This speaker had one, nonetheless, in his attic where he watched it in secrecy!

I have encountered a good deal of nonsense along the way :

The laying-on of hands to heal a leg longer than the other. Some Evangelists were very good at this. It appears, however, that it is quite normal for one of the legs on which we walk to be longer than the other. Why then the spectacle of those legs??

People give public witness to their having been healed. Such as : 'I had cancer, but God has cured me.' Or : 'I had a lump in my breast, it was cancer, but God has miraculously cured me.' It appeared later that these people had themselves come to the conclusion that they had cancer, and that it had never been diagnosed by a doctor.

## 33. The judgement

In daily life, people sometimes hurl all kinds of terrible curses at each other. But it becomes totally unacceptable when done in the Name of God.

One of my female friends had endured a series of enormous tragedies in her youth. And then, to everyone's dismay, her 25 year old brother suddenly suffered a cardiac arrest and died.

She immediately rang her church minister, who came directly. What happened then reads like a 'Horror Story'.

*He enters the house and the first thing he says is : 'Don't imagine he will go to Heaven.'*

Years later, these words continued to ring as 'Hell and damnation' in my friend's ears. To have to deal with such a pronouncement was worse, if worse it could be, than the actual death of her brother.

It took a lifetime to come to terms with this.

## 34. Grief

The church is surely the place where black and white, the high and the low, the rich and poor, should all feel 'at home'. A place for enjoyment, pleasure, joy, but also for mourning, sorrow, worries, problems. Everything should be possible there.

On TV, you see the most awful family situations. Parents and others can be so cruel. The church and Christians can be cruel too.

*They have no children. It was not a voluntary choice. The 'wonderful and moving' story begins. Five children become orphans. Where can they go? Where must they start?*

*The childless married couple see it as their mission for God to take these children into their home.*

If only this had not happened! Almost from the very first day, the children had to keep their grief to themselves. They should be grateful they had been taken into such a good home.

Roughly 6 weeks after the death of their mother, it was Mothering Sunday : a terrible day for these children.

The 'master' of the house ordered the children to buy flowers for the lady of the house. Because she was now caring for them as a mother. There had been enough grieving by now! It was time to stop.

After 30 years, because of that, it is still not over. These children are now adults with children of the same age as they themselves were then. But they were never able to grieve. Have never been able to express their sorrow.

*Why did bystanders, and we with them, allow this couple (my sister and brother-in-law) to mutilate these children in this way?*

The guilt feeling surrounding this deed within my own family has lessened, but not gone.

## 35. Instructive prayer

A converted Rhine barge served as a holiday boat.

Seventy young people of various ages spent a holiday on it.

Sailing past various places along the Rhine, mooring the boat and then, of course, evangelizing. Lazing about is not allowed. Witness is a must.

Rising early, the day began with a period of silence (individual Bible reading and prayer), breakfast, Bible study, lunch, and then on land to sing and evangelize.

*One morning, we had a Bible study on the subject of sexuality.*

*The 'lesson' still fresh in my mind, emphasized that if you are very much in love and you want more than a kiss (no mention of sleeping together, of course), then you would have to pray. The longing would then pass!!*

Not going to bed with each other, was drummed into us constantly. There was never any talk about how beautiful sexuality is, and is meant to be. There was never any talk of respect for each other as lovers. No talk about the intense enjoyment of love and sex.

I am so grateful that my husband and I went our own way on this, and that our ears did not heed these so-called 'wise' but very 'cold' lessons.



## 36. Sex before marriage

They are so young, so beautiful, so in love. They want to marry and to have their marriage blessed in church. They ask to speak with the minister and 'elders'. And they do. I can still see it : two lovely people, ready and willing to embark on that enormous wonderful, and difficult, adventure. Sitting opposite them are the minister and one or two other 'brothers', all of whom know so well how life should, and should not, be.

*'Have you slept together yet?'*

*'If you have, then you will first of all have to confess your wrongdoing, because you are not allowed to sleep together before marriage.'!!*

It is even worse if you 'have to' marry. She is 16 and he is 17. Far too young, of course, to start on that great adventure, and pregnant as well. They too have to appear before the tribunal to ask forgiveness for their 'sin'. Followed by public confession before the whole congregation on Sunday morning, as the final terror.

Another story concerns a young girl who became pregnant, and who only married the father of the child a year later. Several years after that, she was told that the start of their marriage lay on them like a curse!

*These and other situations were real. What arrogance to put such pressure on a young couple at the start of their life together.*

Fortunately, practices like these do not occur everywhere. But judgement and punishment are too easily meted out in 'the community'.

## 37. Pregnant

We had 3 children and our family was complete. And then I discovered - oh heavens, I'm pregnant! Not planned. We had taken all the necessary precautions. But still!

We had decided that I would work part-time in the office. I used to do the bookkeeping at home, but lately it seemed better to work at the office.

Suddenly, there was confusion everywhere!

*I tell my mother the news. Her reaction was :*

*'You've got enough on your hands, damn it.'*

*I tell my sister-in-law! Her reaction is : 'How awful, how are you going to manage? Can't you take a 'morning-after' pill? Or talk to the doctor?' (She is very much against abortion!!)*

*It's Sunday. The house is full : the five of us, plus the three children of Church friends we were looking after.*

*I'm not feeling well. Stomach pains. I have the feeling the pregnancy is not going well.*

*'Leen, I'm going upstairs - I don't feel well. Look after the children, will you?*

*I go to the toilet. Have the feeling I'm getting a contraction and losing something - and there it is, in the toilet. I look and see a miniature human being. Very, very small, some 3 cm. I take it upstairs and telephone my midwife - she comes.*

*She is in awe of that tiny fruit of my womb and the placenta,*

*everything in miniature. We look with wonder. She asks me : 'Is everything okay with you?' I smile and say : 'Yes, I'm fine.'*

*Leen is downstairs, the children have been taken to the church (which starts at 5 o'clock).*

*I call Leen and ask for a cup of coffee, to which he replies : 'I'm right in the middle of a film!'*

*I take a blanket, go downstairs and lie down on the settee.*

*My brother and sister-in-law come with their 3 children and bring our children with them.*

*We make a few jokes together!*

*You would almost think everyone was pleased about the miscarriage. When I think about it in retrospect, I wonder : what was happening, why was there was no emotion?*

The following day, the matter had passed, it was behind us.  
Physically perhaps, but mentally?

*Why did I respond in this way? But there was real pain inside!  
Why was I outwardly so strong?*

I wish I knew!!

## 38. Evangelization, wanted or unwanted

The world must know that Jesus lives! This was the motto of the church we attended in the 1970s and early 1980s. And it meant that the church organised many evangelization campaigns.

Polling was the main part of one such campaign. Every day, for a whole week. Some had taken a week's leave from their work.

*'Naturally, I was part of it too. I was there every day.*

*The weather was good. I like talking, which meant that asking people questions was no problem for me.*

*It is the last day. The survey had continued all morning. I am tired! I hurry home and tidy things up a bit. Willem (the middle son) comes home from school and says : 'Mum, you have to go to school this afternoon - they are giving information on all the schools in the area, so that we can choose which one I will go to.' Heavens, I've forgotten all about it! I rush there on my bike. Time is very short.*

As I look back, I see myself sitting there, red in the face. Puffing and blowing after cycling so fast. Weary after all that evangelization work throughout the week. And then it's back home again! In the meantime, it has started raining. Two girls also doing evangelization work are sheltering from the rain in my house.

One of the girls accidentally knocks against a saucepan of oil standing on the draining board. The pan, plus contents, falls to the ground. I had a busy family life with frequent visitors so it was not unusual for things to fall, but it had never bothered me before.

But when this happened at that moment, I simply lost control. I cursed and raged, and I couldn't stop. The girls looked at me, their faces white with shock. I had never before let myself go to this extent.

I can remember coming to my senses again and saying sorry. They left me to myself.

And then something happened which proved to be a turning point in my life. I sat on the settee completely dumbfounded. It was as if a voice deep inside me was saying : 'You didn't have to do that evangelization work every day for Me. I didn't ask you to do it'!

What a relief! I didn't need to do it. I didn't have to do it!  
I had made myself do it. It had become an obsession.

This event provoked a whole new process in me. A kick-the-habit process. That 'must' had to go! That hurt, no more 'must'. That 'must' had been a curse and it still raises its ugly head in me, from time to time.

## 39. Under the blood

I had at last gathered enough courage to commit a number of problems to paper, and to send them out so that they could be discussed.

*'They phoned, they will call in.'*

How will they react? I am very curious, and so anxious I could choke! I hope Leen will be home on time. I don't want to, and I can't, face the confrontation with them alone.

*There they are! They are furious, I can see it on their faces!*

*My sister-in-law throws the letter I sent onto the table; several lines have been underlined in red.*

*And she starts : 'How could you do this?!' She at least responds. I try to interrupt her and tell her that the letter is a just an opening so that we can talk.*

*We have to talk.*

*And what, to my amazement, does my brother say? He says : 'Let's pray and put it under the blood of Jesus Christ!'*

*I splutter in opposition and say : 'No, I don't want that, I want to talk, I think we should discuss the situation.' 'No', says my brother, 'I want to pray! Not talk!'*

*Leen takes my hand and squeezes it, as if wants to say : Give him what he wants! It's a lost cause!*

*Oh, how cheated I feel, I comply, we pray, and it's awful!*

Deep inside me, I knew already : This will never happen to me again! No talk? Then no praying.

It felt then like spiritual rape. I should have stuck to my 'No'.

## 40. Spiritual rape

We were sitting in a large circle. A mixture of young and old. The minister was administering bread and wine. Holy Communion was being celebrated.

The minister comes to our eldest son (a teenager at the time) and gives him the bread.

*'Look at me! Do you love the Lord Jesus. Tell me! He gave His blood for you too.' It sounds so intimidating.*

*I can see it happening. And I think : 'Dear, dear child of mine, look at him! Say you love the Lord Jesus, because then he will stop and move on to the next person.'*

After so many years, I can still feel the sweat breaking out on my skin as I think back on that moment. And I feel guilty, because I had not intervened in what was happening there.

I should have screamed at the minister and told him to stop manipulating and spiritually raping my child.  
And I am still trying to make it up to my son.

## 41. Kneeling

I am already aware of it during the singing. I have got to get out of here. I can't take it any longer.

I am sitting in the church or, more precisely, in the community gathering. The word church is not used in this 'church' (they look arrogantly down on it).

After the singing, the adoration service begins (a kind of prayer service).

I do not feel comfortable. Things have happened in the last weeks which should not have been allowed to happen.

*The minister leads the 'adoration'.*

*Everyone is praying! And then someone announces what Our Lord is, and is not, going to do with us!*

*At that point, something snaps inside me! I have the same feeling as I had in my brother-in-law's study, when he asked : 'Are you certain this is what God wants?'*

*I said out loud and calmly : 'Years ago, someone said that we should be caring and loving towards the weak. Have we perhaps forgotten that?'*

The minister is angry. I should not have done this. I can hear it in his voice.

The whole congregation is standing. Waiting for the sign to sit down again. To my astonishment, he embarks on a story about 'giving yourself 100%'. And then he says : 'let us kneel'. He demands that everyone obey him.

*All eyes are closed. I look round and I look at the minister. The*

*expression on his face is tight-lipped and sour. I will remember that moment until the day I die. It looks like a fight. Who will win?*

*Everyone kneels. I have no intention of kneeling. Certainly not for this minister. I refuse!*

But kneel I do! Later, a friend sitting behind me said ( and unaware of the fight between the minister and me) : 'You looked as if you had shrivelled from a young woman into an old lady.'

I should not have knelt.

I still regret it.

This was our last Sunday in this 'community'.

Years later, I attended a large music-and-song event in England. More than 1000 people knelt. I was the only one who remained seated and did not kneel. I was given the chance again to say 'no' to something said from the platform, but which had different implications for me.

## 42. Departure

It is nearly Easter 1985. For the first time in my life, I will not celebrate Easter in the church!

In Evangelical and Pentecostal circles, Easter is more important than Christmas.

For as long as I can remember, very little attention was given to Christmas.

No, instead, we had Good Friday/the Crucifixion, Jesus dying for our sins. And then Easter Sunday, the Resurrection! That was something to celebrate!

As a family, we still wanted to celebrate Easter. How should we do that with just the five of us?

Holy Communion!

Bread and wine.

We discussed it with the children.

It was celebrated in my eldest son's bedroom (he was 15 years old).

Short and simple. It lasted about 15 minutes. I can still remember thinking : does this accord with the tradition we have been taught?

It is a few days after Easter. Brother-in-law, the minister, telephones me.

'How did you spend the Easter days together?', he asks.

In all openness, I tell him about the Holy Communion service we had had together as a family, and that for some reason or other, I was not able to completely enjoy it.

'Of course you couldn't enjoy it, it was not right. It is improper to celebrate Holy Communion as a family. Only the church can do that.

*Again something seemed to break inside me. Everything, the stories, the manipulation, his coercive manner, all came bubbling to the surface of my mind. I asked him : 'would you please stop, I really can't take it right now!!'*

I could tell he was surprised. Someone had actually told him to stop!

And his little sister-in-law at that! He did not stop, but continued to talk 'at' me. I said three times - 'please stop talking'.

At the third request, I threw the receiver down.

I collapsed, literally and figuratively.

What followed was a stepping back, and a release, from the manipulation of this man.

What I did not know then, was just how complicated the process I had just initiated, would really be.

This Easter 1985 telephone call was the last time I heard his voice!

## 43. Holy Communion

A year later - 1986 - there had been no further contact with brother-in-law and sister.

It was Easter again!

My brother-in-law had sent a letter to my mother, to my brother, and to us. It was a very pained, emotional letter, containing assignments for us all.

He wanted to celebrate Holy Communion as a family. My mother was to arrange for the table. My brother for the bread or the wine - or, was it our job to get the bread and wine? (I can't remember exactly.)

I recall that this letter had a very constricting effect on me. I did not want anything to do with it. I telephoned my brother and asked him what we should do. My brother expressed no direct opinion on the matter, and cowardly took a non-committal stand on it.

*What must I do?!!*

*All that previous year I had feared bearing my brother-in-law's voice again, fearful of a confrontation.*

*And now it would just have to come! I had to take a close look at everything that had happened in the last year.*

I wrote a letter in which I tried to explain what I had heard about him from others in the previous months, and about the manipulation which I had also felt in my own life.

I was particularly appalled at what he had done to the lives of others. The last sentence in the letter was an invitation to talk, together with my husband. I couldn't face it alone.

His reply to my letter was brief and to-the-point : he wished no further contact!

Holy Communion was possible, but talking was not! What a hypocrite! The most bizarre part of the story is the Holy Communion history (*see previous chapter*).

Our Holy Communion celebration a year before was wrong. His Holy

Communion celebration was good.

What I find so difficult in my family relationships is the tendency to hide behind God/to use God as a shield.

In any kind of conflict, He is manoeuvred into position between us, and He is used to cover up something.

There is no way out of this - I am being misused and God is being misused!

## 44. Negativity

It was a terrible story my girl friend told me about my brother-in-law, the minister. The Holy Communion my brother-in-law had suggested we should celebrate together, and which I refused, was 18 months ahead. I wanted to explain my refusal to him. I therefore wrote him a detailed letter saying that I knew the secret which my girl friend had kept to herself for so many years. And that I knew more secrets about him.

*I telephoned my brother before sending this letter. 'Will you read the letter I have written to our brother-in-law?' 'No, I'd rather not', he said - I was very surprised.*

Why did he never want to get involved? When it came to the crunch, he always sat on the fence ...

When it came down to it, he was always negative, critical about everything. About our ministry. There was a Bible study session, for instance, at which we and many of our organisation's staff/volunteers were present. It was about having your own business. Our ministry was not of his church, and we would have to give it up and give ourselves entirely to the 'his church' and listen to him! Why was he never enthusiastic, happy and positive about what I did? Or about others? I did a TV screen-test once and was proud of it. His response was : 'Nothing will come of it'.

Negativity is a curse and its effects are long-lasting. It has influenced my life for a very long time. I blame myself that I only saw my own talents after many years had already passed.

## 45. Rebel

It was Saturday evening when he 'phoned. I was surprised, this friend never rang us during the weekend.

*After the usual 'hello, how are you?', he asked : 'Would you mind if my wife and I came to see you this evening?' 'Yes, of course you can come, but it is so unexpected. I am home alone. Leen (my husband) is away for the weekend.' 'I need to tell you something', he said. 'Is it really so important?', I ask. He replies that he has 'to come clean and tell my sins.' I ask : 'What have you done?'- 'Impurity, fornication', he says. I am shocked to the core. I have known them both for so long. All I could say was : 'Okay, come.'*

I had known this friend for more than 25 years. I had worked in his evangelization ministry. He had devoted his life to proclaiming the Gospels. I could not imagine his having contacts with prostitutes!

*They arrived a few hours later. How should I handle this? I made some coffee, my usual habit in difficult situations. I remember saying 'you bastard!' to him. He sits next to me on the settee. He starts to cry and I put my arms around him, he says : 'Forgive me and we will stay friends, won't we?' I say, 'Of course.'*

*In the middle of his theatrical confession, he says : 'Ria, the work your husband does in the trade union and such like, we don't need that. And all those old books of mine (there were some of his books in the bookcase), you must throw them away.' He ended by saying : 'Ria, don't be such a rebel!'*

It was only after they had left, that I realised fully what had actually taken place. He came to tell me something dreadful, but still managed to take charge of everything going on in my house. He turned the whole thing upside down. There he was, busy telling me what I must, and must not, do. And all this before I had even opened my mouth,

and still in shock at the realisation that his whole life and his entire preaching had been one enormous lie.

He also manipulated my husband and me on several occasions in the time we knew him. And in coming now to unburden his soul, he was still not honest.

*I was left feeling totally drained.*

I still cannot understand the schizophrenia and the dishonest preaching of this man.



## 46. Learn and live

The Revival, Evangelical, Baptist, and holiness movements, in which I have participated, have had a tremendous influence on my life, and on how I think and how I act. I was born in 1946, and was active in these movements until 1984. My parents had come to the faith before the war, in very much the same kind of movement : it was called 'Jeruel'. The minister was their model, their friend. War broke out and what did they discover? The minister had joined the Fascist movement. What are your feelings at moments like that?

Of the various preachers I have known, all have told me how to live, and especially how to live 'properly'. And what did I later discover? One of them had manipulated women and seduced a very young girl (my friend, aged 16 at the time), with the words : 'God has brought us together, it is His will'. The second, having delivered his sermons at large gatherings, then went on to solicit the services of call girls and prostitutes. The third went to the foreign missions, established an orphanage, and sexually abused young children. The fourth went for walks on the beach on Sundays and made appointments with young boys. He was a homosexual and for him there was no 'coming out' - he did not dare. There are many other such examples I could mention. And all these men, were often so 'dogmatic in the pulpit'.

It is not the situations themselves that so appal me. But rather the hypocritical preaching which went on for all those years. This is my confusion and this is my disbelief. When I meet 'leaders' now making all kinds of dogmatic claims, I automatically think there must be something not quite right about them.

I still find it difficult to place my trust in the honesty of Christians.

## 47. My partner's influence

Will he be there again this evening? I had seen him yesterday for the first time. He was at the book table, selling books in the interval. He looked a nice boy! I have butterflies in my stomach. I am in love

And it was mutual. We became a couple. He was different from the boy and girl friends I had been mixing with. Subconsciously, it was the artistic/romantic in him that drew me. He was in charge of theatrical activities at the Teacher Training College; he painted, he played music, he wrote texts, poems, read literature. He had broad interests that both attracted and repelled me. The leaders and ministers in the Christian movement, of which we were both a part, did not understand him. I had been warned about him. "He was not a suitable partner." My family put up with him. No one paid any real attention to him. And I?! Did I take any notice of his artistic, romantic side?

I had become so focused, as a result of my upbringing, on the 'spiritual side' of people, and thus on his spiritual side too. Why was it that I only began to appreciate the 'non-spiritual' side of him so many years later?

Subconsciously, for my benefit and for the benefit of others, Leen tried for some time to play down the more artistic and romantic sides of his character. And I allowed it!!

I felt guilty about it. That I almost allowed myself, my being, to be destroyed is one thing, but why did I not want people to see Leen's artistic traits?

## 48. My children's influence

This book is about the ups and downs of my Christian upbringing during my childhood. The sad part about it is that I regarded my upbringing up to around the age of 35 years as 'up'. But after that, I began to discover that it also had many 'downs'.

*You are 3 weeks old, asleep in your cot. I am looking at you! I am 22 years of age, still far too young to realise what it is to bring a child to adulthood.*

*'Dear tiny creature : I do not know whether you will regard me as your mother all your life; but I do know that, for the rest of my life, I will be your mother!'*

I took the task on. Wonderful, surely! Certainly on the basis of my faith. And what happened? I made the same mistakes as were made in my own upbringing.

The "spiritual" was also of primary importance in my attitude towards the children. It may sound strange, but what saved our family was our eldest child, from the age of about 14 years, saying 'no' to Christian institutions.

I should add too that it occurred simultaneously with the process of awakening that had already begun in my own life.

But here too I feel sorrow - that, for the first 14 years, I did not satisfy their yearnings.

## September 1995

My final story was not one of "all's well that ends well"! I simply stopped, because there were still so many stories and more would come!

So long as there are people, institutions, churches, ministries and movements, there will be 'stories' like these. That is simply the way it is! It is people who inflict pain.

And now - what happened to me along the way? By leaving the church in 1984 and saying 'goodbye' to my extended family, I was naturally thrown back onto myself. No church, no extended family. I can remember feeling as if I was standing naked before the Almighty God, and that everything I had learned and which I felt so sure about, was gone. I stood there empty and alone, and for the first time in my life I had to find the answer to the question : "In What and Who do I believe?!"

I discovered that there was faith in God without the frills, without the traditions, the humbug and human manipulations. That faith was a treasure well buried and well preserved! All the experiences I have had, have not succeeded in destroying this.

Of course, I also have many lovely and grateful memories. But despite these, the situations I have mentioned have borne down heavily on me. Professional therapy (1992-1994) and a period in Norway, helped me greatly. Now, after all those years, I know who I am. I have conquered the manipulation. And I still believe in God, my Creator. I am still allergic to manipulation, nonetheless.

## September 1999

A number of circumstances have contributed to this manuscript laying idle for some time. I have gained in strength these years. I have become a proud grandmother. I was also able to return to my work, and that is certainly a positive sign of recovery. But there was something still nagging at me, something unfinished, but what? And this week, I have finally been able to put it into words, and it means that I can now round off this book and, with it, this part of my life :

Someone asked : "What did he do to you?"

So much! But so difficult to put into words. I have written it in this book. And yet! It remains a too polite, a too distant way of writing.

That question : "What did he do to you?", put everything in its place! And I replied : *'They wanted to break my soul, my spirit, my body.' I got quite a shock when it came out.*

*"He proclaimed, manipulated, wanted to own me and others."*

And as I think back on my conversion, I feel no joy! It was so bigoted, confined, narrow and dark.

And I could swear when I think back on my baptism : In the long black robe.

The talk which in that context I had with two old men, was dreadful - they sawed me in half, as it were, in search of what I believed and why!

It should not have been allowed.

He should not have been allowed to pray with me in that small room. God's holiness and purity have been soiled by his interference. He had nothing whatsoever to do with my spiritual wellbeing, my faith, my doubt, my emotions, my sexuality, my dreams, my questions. Why didn't my parents prevent him?

Why was he allowed to preach, pray, stimulate emotions, manipulate?

Why did he stand between me and God? Why was my future not important? Why did he interfere with everything and everyone?

That period derailed my thinking, my faith and my emotions.  
Until I said "NO" : 'this far, and no further.'

As Christian leaders, you cannot treat children like that. As a child and teenager, I should have been playing, dancing, enjoying God's Creation.

What is most difficult in all of this, is that I have been the victim of *"manipulation"*. And no proof of it can be produced. If something physical had taken place, I could still have reported it. But, alas, that is not possible with manipulation. And yet manipulation is just as bad. Manipulation of this kind amounts to spiritual rape.

*"He wanted to possess my soul, my mind and my body."*

In 1984, I finally said '**NO**' to the psychological/spiritual rape, and began to search for my roots, for God. I have discovered that God wants to make people free; freedom to choose, freedom to live, to think and to feel. And no one else may possess my soul, my mind, my body. I am a 'whole person'. God given. He is the only one in whom I dare to trust.

## Interview with Ria

Why have you chosen to use 'miniatures', rather than write an autobiographical novel?

*'I began writing a monthly column in 1984. That concise style, with a thought or incident as the core, suits me best. I would not be able to write a novel, or I would have to have the help of a ghost-writer. I have written this small book, therefore, in my own way and in a style that best expresses my thoughts.'*

If you put those 'miniatures' in a row, they present in their totality a very tarnished image of a few people and a few religious streams. Were you not overcome by a feeling of pure disgust when you put those examples into the collective perspective of one horrendous event?

*Actually, I only felt disgust a couple of times, when writing specific chapters. What was so strange was that I could write most pieces almost 'from a distance', as it were. Once I had a piece written, I moved on to the next, although I did sometimes take a short break between. Committing all this to paper undoubtedly cost me a great deal of energy, but not necessarily emotion. The reason lies partly, I think, in the fact that that manipulation and that artificiality had become a 'normal' part of my life. I could not allow the emotion I felt at the time to take over : life had to go on.'*

And yet, each piece clearly contains considerable emotion.

*'I think emotions and coping with emotions have developed rather strangely in my life. Probably because the strands of my life are so intertwined : family life, growing up as a child and teenager, that church, the role played by relatives and his role as preacher-minister, personal faith, life choices. I think, therefore, there is*

*something in me, like : not knowing what 'authentic emotions' are. Everything was so mixed-up, and that's why I can't feel it as such. That, of course, can be confusing from time to time.'*

Has the writing of it helped you to put your life in order again?

*'When I re-read and re-live it, I feel I have come out of it as a fairly strong individual. Someone who has also had to pay the price; I do not swing from 'high highs' to 'low lows'. But that does not mean that I am superficial. I have learned to live without all that baggage, and have learned as best I can to live with my past.'*

*My story has not ended. There is an on-going process of development. I also see so many desperately unhappy situations around me, similar to the ones I have experienced; and all the instances of manipulation always touch me deeply. Sometimes I feel as if I am surrounded by a sea of dark mud, precisely because I am familiar with that kind of situation. I have the feeling I want to jump in, but the mud is so impenetrable that one prefers to step back and walk away from it.'*

Does this mean that you feel you have had enough sorrow in your life?

*'Yes and no. And I wouldn't want to say that my life has been one long vale of tears. It may seem so, perhaps, when you read those pieces. They are very unhappy situations which left deep scars in me. There were, fortunately, other happier periods : with my parents, and certainly within my own nuclear family. Those sad events have touched raw nerves too in those who have so far been able to read about them. That recognition is both comforting and painful.'*

In their totality, those experiences must have amounted to quite a lot, otherwise you would not have gone into therapy.

*I started therapy because I found myself in conflict with a number of things. The process had actually begun in 1983/4. I have always been able to discuss everything with my husband. But at some point, I obviously went too far. I can remember his saying once: 'I am your husband, not your therapist!' I was bothered by that at first, but it was certainly true. Who then do you turn to? We know many Christian counsellors, I could have consulted them of course, but I wanted someone neutral. I ended up at the Regional Mental Health Centre where, for two years (1992/4), I received excellent care and supervision. What finally tipped the balance, was an incident involving a female employee at our office in 1991. I saw then just how tired, exhausted, and burned-out I really was. I realised that something had to happen. And it was then that I started to look for professional help. Strangely enough, I started by talking about what my friend had suffered at my brother-in-law's hands. And it was only then that I finally came to my own past. It was sometimes very intense, sometimes with few emotions, and conversely there were times when it released all kinds of emotions in me. In undergoing therapy, you decide how far you want to go. And thus it brought all kinds of different emotions and situations to the surface. It was my husband who encouraged me to put pen to paper.*

*The therapy has, without doubt, been extremely helpful to me. Therapy, however, is merely an aid, an instrument. It is you, and you alone, who has to do the real work. You are the one who goes through the process; you are exercising your will, it is constantly your own decision. The therapist 'feeds' the process. I feel I had got things fairly straight in my mind by then. The problem was the way everything in my youth had got so muddled: that Christian movement, that church, family relationships and what was expected of me, how I had to behave.*

*Defining what I actually thought about things, was also something I had to do for myself. It was partly, therefore, an awareness-process, quite separate from all those imposed opinions. As a person, I have to keep my feet firmly on the ground, especially when I again come face-to-face with manipulation in all its forms; in Christian*

*movements and churches. It means that you sometimes have to stand back. A victim of rape has to stand back from the perpetrator; not to do so is poison. My poison is the system that manipulated me. I survived it, I did not go under. But on your own, you can do so little about the reasons, the 'why' of it all. And that gives you an added sense of being powerless and vulnerable.'*

Are you bitter about the fact that what you have experienced has robbed you of part of your youth?

*'Oh no, you were not allowed to be bitter! I have lost count of the number of times it was talked about, that you must never be bitter, because it meant that you had no contact with God. In the meantime, they could go on manipulating and compounding things still further. For people of faith, there was no place for bitterness and hate; if they did arise in you, you had to work hard on them. Despite the wrong motives that lay behind such statements, I do feel that hate and bitterness in us, are poisonous. That does not preclude your having some periods of pain, anger, and frustration etc. I have had strong feelings of home-sickness and longing, at the realisation that I had no chance of reliving certain parts of my life. Certainly when you consider how my church preached certain pointless rules of behaviour, which actually had no bearing whatsoever on true faith. How often were we not asked: 'are you sure that that is God's will?', 'does the Lord really want that?', 'can the Lord Jesus walk that path with you?', and so on. I later discovered that Jesus always walks your path with you. And, in consequence, my life is far more relaxed now. I am not bitter, but I am sometimes very angry when I see that this kind of anxiety is still instilled into the minds of children. It may be that I feel an occasional melancholy at the thought that they robbed me of my openness and innocence. Sometimes I think: was it really that bad? - especially when you consider how many millions of people have to endure the most awful suffering, today and every day. But then I conclude that even though I am only describing a few people in one institutional church, I can and must protect myself*

*against practices of this kind. From a very early age, it was drummed into you what was expected of you, how you should live your life, what you must, or must not, do! And the people who say it are convinced they are right. They do not have the right, however, to taint your innocence. Of course, this is a tough and corrupt society and we have to be survivors in it. Creating a climate of fear, however, does not help. It should, in fact, be crystal clear, but it is instead as if we have turned it into thick fog, a dark quagmire. And sometimes we feel ourselves powerless against it. Because the same things are happening all the time, and I can do nothing about them.'*

Could this book help?

*'In the first place, I have written it all down for myself. And secondly, I hope it will help anyone who reads it. But whether or not it will make any structural difference? I have considerable doubt about that. The chance is high that this book will be used against me. By committing it all to paper, I am just making it more difficult for myself. Those who have read it so far, gave me the encouragement to finally 'go public'. It is strange to find yourself confronted again by your own indoctrination process, in the sense of: 'Would the Lord approve of this book being published?' And then I say to myself: 'Even if He didn't approve, I would still do it!' A comment more fitting to a teenager perhaps.*

Why would God have difficulties with this? Did He not say: 'the truth shall set you free'?

*'For so many years, I was told the truth from only one particular viewpoint. It cost me tremendous effort to wrestle myself free from that 'truth'. That also plays a role in this book. There are so many 'heavy', evangelical, orthodox and Catholic groups, all with their own particular anxieties and fears, despite the fact that it is brought to them in terms of beauty and love. I had to make my way through that fear of God to the light of truth, and that was my liberation. But*

*sometimes that old indoctrination, that curse, raises its ugly head again in my thoughts.'*

The messengers come over rather badly in your book. You have every reason to lose your faith in God. How can you still believe?

*'My upbringing ensured that I would think seriously about God. I came to see that there is a difference between what the institutional church/community does, and who God is: that there is a difference between what those 'messengers', those 'savers of mankind', say and who God is. People are, and remain, people with their faults and their shortcomings. God, thank God!, is far greater and transcends it all. And with that God, I am safe. That faith cannot be broken.'*

Is your book a crying-out to the true God?

*'I am rather pessimistic and recalcitrant about the 'minor messengers', what they did, and the church as institute. I see my book more as a whimper against the giant. God does hear my whimpering, that I know, but I am not sure whether people will understand it.*

*These Christian movements can easily out-shout the whimperings of its helpless victims. For my part, I would be quite happy for those institutes to become voiceless for a while, particularly when I see true humanness disappearing under the weight of their proclamations. I had to discover who I really am. The community, the messengers, who should have helped me, blocked my path completely. How many others have had to endure that? We must not veil the human issue here.'*

Is the becoming who you are, the core of your story?

*'Yes, I suppose it is. It is the side-paths, the bad intentions, the journey of discovery, that together constitute the core-motif. I have, after all, found my way out of the quagmire. I hope I have become more*

*human, others can judge that. My journey goes on.'*

'How did, and does, your family react to this journey?

*'They gave me all the freedom I needed. My husband has stimulated me greatly in all of this. Thank God I had a husband who supported me; if he had not, there would probably have been a divorce. My children have also given me great encouragement. The book made a deep impression on them. Not everything was new to them. They had already seen some of it. My aging mother encouraged me in a very special way too; she said : 'What you have written is good. That's exactly the way it was, unfortunately.' For myself, the positive element is that in committing it to paper, I have distanced myself from this way of thinking. I have, in this way, been able to bring that part of my life to a close, and I have the feeling I am stronger, and I have absolutely no wish to return to that old, twisted, world. In the last few years I have felt I was treading thick mud, but the ground is now firm under my feet, I am no longer sinking into the mire. Although I have achieved a certain degree of happiness (within my nuclear family certainly), functioning on a daily basis can still sometimes cost me enormous energy.'*

Have the therapy, the writing, the 'new' life, cleared the fog a bit for you?

*'I cannot, and will not, go back to those old patterns. Even though I do not always have the answers, and certainly not in the way they always had a ready answer to everything in my community in the past, because they had it all mapped out for us. That has all been cast aside, completely. It means too that I have no idea what tomorrow will bring. All I want is to live my life today, to the full. In that sense, the mist has cleared, my stance in life today is far more realistic. It could be that Christians who were part of my past, now feel I am really walking into the mist because, in their terms, I have strayed completely. When I read my 'miniatures', I see that I have*

*been able to get things fairly straight, and I have learned to take life as it comes and to be myself. It was worth taking that journey through the quagmire for that. I have so far not drowned in the experiences of the past.'*

How do you handle concepts such as forgiveness and reconciliation now?

*'These words are very often used to simply sweep everything under the carpet. I have written twice to both my brother and my brother-in-law. They refused to talk. That says enough about their thinking. Forgiveness is not : behaving as if nothing has happened and and playing a pretending game with each other. If you do that, you remain imprisoned in a net of lies.*

*The first step is an honest discussion or an honest exchange of letters.'*

*And finally : I am left with a vague feeling, a longing for "something", homesickness.*

P.L. 1-5-1999

# Afterword

By: Thea Fonteyn

Dear Ria,

Having twice read your manuscript, I would now like to give you my reactions. When I first read it, I was shocked by the contents. And when I read it again, I was calmer and more at ease, but still appalled.

I was also shocked by the fact that I find it so normal that lies, manipulation and power go hand and hand with stupidity in evangelical circles; the same is probably also true outside of evangelical communities.

During the first reading, a number of emotions surfaced in me, as also the question as to why I find it so normal. The reason is that I have also been submerged by this power and manipulative behaviour. I have to say that I still have questions about it: e.g. why are evangelical movements breeding places for intimidation excesses of this kind? Why are they the places where people can lose their vitality and creativity? Is it one large make-believe world?

Your stories remind me so much of several situations in which I stood and watched, and merely registered and thought 'there is something not quite right here'.

I have met this kind of situation repeatedly in evangelical milieus. Under the layer of 'Hallelujahs' and 'Praise the Lord', there was venom, aggression, stupidity and perversion. And this always confused me. The 'how' and 'why' of this behaviour has to do, I think, with the fact that there is no unity between word and deed. Jesus made a number of very clear statements on this, with reference to the Pharisees. One of the best, I think, is the following: they are blind guides, inwardly full of robbery and destruction, who place heavy burdens on people without raising a finger to help.

Another reason, perhaps, is that we live in a word-culture and not in

a culture in which deeds are paramount.

I came from the traditional church into the 'Promised Land' of the 'Evangelical' faithful. They were proud of not belonging to the 'plebs' of the church. We were supposed to be the cream of the bunch. And then it gets rather unsettling, because it is all so desperately dull, and also because integrity is apparently not important and of no consequence. I have friends who say that they prefer not to have dealings with Christians, because they neither pay up nor keep to agreements. In short, it seems that within these evangelical circles the lack of professional know-how, the absence of integrity, the intimidation, bad communication, lack of self-criticism and carelessness, are quite normal.

At the personal level, it seems to me that as a child you had a very special place within your family. I think you must have been a sparkling personality, very 'present' and impressionable. And thus you paid the price for your own lust for life, your instinctive desire to live it to the full, and your originality. Drama of all kinds surrounded and enveloped you as the spotlight, time and again, turned on you. You had no power, however, to steer the drama in any particular direction. People hovered around you, wanting to 'determine' and mould you according to their image/ideas. George Steiner, a Jewish philosopher, said (in: 'A season in hell'): 'We hate most of all those who hold up to us a purpose, an ideal, a visionary promise, which we cannot attain; despite stretching our muscles to the utmost, it again and again slips beyond our reach - but, which nonetheless, and this is the essence, remains utterly attractive to us, and we cannot dismiss it, because we recognize its tremendous value.'

Your brother-in-law apparently saw something in you, against which he had to take a firm stand, namely your vital creativity and your authenticity. And he was not alone, many followed him.

And so you have unwillingly, and unwittingly, played a major role in this drama, for which there was no applause. It taught you never to put your name under anything, because you knew you could not handle



the consequences it provoked. A number of times in your story, you ask : why did no one intervene? Take, for instance, the story of that young boy bombarded with the Gospel texts. When something like that turns into a shouting match, you can normally at least say 'shut up'. But you don't say that so easily when pious words are turned into 'words of abuse'. It may be that religious or erotic 'attacks' are the most difficult to fathom, never mind to stop.

What it ultimately boils down to every time, is power and the misuse of power. Why is it that certain people within the evangelical circuit are given power, while others remain powerless under it? I do not know.

I can relate to your stories and stand aghast at how truth and immaturity merge into an ugly mixture; or, even worse - at how the lust for power merges with violence and aggression; and - at how lies are constantly able to filter through the layer of pious words.

I am pleased with your book, and hope that others will also recognize themselves in it. I hope especially that women, as a result of your book, will move forward.

## **Other books written by Ria La Rivière:**

- Bits and pieces
- Quacks
- Snippets
- Lessons, Leaders & Life

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