

# THINGS WE COULDN'T SAY



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**A dramatic account of Christian resistance in Holland during World War II**

**DIET EMAN**  
with James Schaap

Lighthouse Trails Publishing  
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## Things We Couldn't Say

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*In memory of my beloved fiancé Hein Sietsma,  
who laid down his life for friends and strangers.  
The greatest love knows the greatest pain.*  
*Diet Eman*



*If any man will come after me, let him deny himself,  
and take up his cross, and follow me.*

—Jesus (Matthew 16:24)



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Remember, just as we have thought  
of our own land and friends—  
day always follows after night,  
and darkness always ends.

*Jan Campert*





## The Hague—1938

**A**s far back as I can remember, my father ran a prosperous interior decorating business, with many people working for him making drapes and lace curtains, as well as hanging wallpaper and doing upholstery. He did a good deal of contract work for wealthy and important people in the Dutch city of The Hague.

But when I was nine years old, in 1929-30, a severe depression hit the Netherlands, just as it did the rest of Europe and America. At a time like that, no one can afford extras and accessories; people buy nothing beyond the bare necessities. The depression left our family with little income—so little, in fact, that it looked like I was not going to be able to go on to university. I wanted to, of course, and all my teachers wanted me to go on; but Father said I could not. After all, he said, I was just a girl.

That was the only time I remember my mother and father actually quarreling. Mother felt I should go on, but Father said no—it was too expensive, and, after all, my brothers *had* to go to university. I'd probably just get married anyway. Mother fought very hard, but she lost.

I had always been a tomboy. When my sister was sixteen, she loved to wear high heels and have her hair just so. But when I was that age, wherever I went, my hair was always a mess. I

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loved climbing trees and having adventures out in the country. My brother Albert and I and our friends used to pedal our bikes outside The Hague to little villages and farms, out to where we found pastures with *sloten*, those little brooks and moats that are still there today.

Sometimes on the *tweede Paasdag* (meaning “second Easter day,” or “second Pentecost”), the Monday school holidays after important religious holidays, we’d go out into the country and climb trees and jump ditches. Some of those *sloten* were quite wide, and of course eventually we’d fall into the water. That was part of the fun of it, and I loved it.

My sister would plead with my mother. “Don’t let Diet do that,” she would say. “She should be much more ladylike.”



Diet, as a young teen

One day in 1937, Mr. Reitsma, a man from our church (the *koster* as we called him in Dutch—the church janitor and bookkeeper), spoke to my parents.

“I have an old friend whose name is Jilt Sietsma. One of his sons has found a job here in The Hague at Shell Oil. This son can’t pay much, but he needs a place to live.”

Father looked over at Mother, because he left those kinds of decisions up to her.

“I thought of the Emans,” Mr. Reitsma went on, “because you are such a nice family. Could you maybe take this boy in—at least until he finds a place to live?”



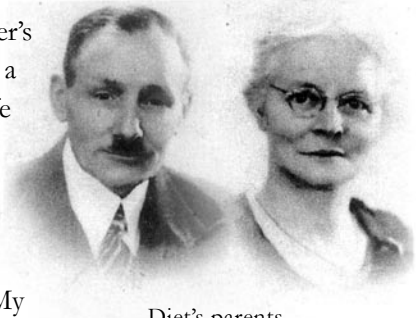
Fanny, Diet’s  
older sister

My mother wasn’t taken with the idea, at least at first, but besides being the decision-maker on these types of matters, she had a big heart.

“This boy is the oldest of a very large family,” Mr. Reitsma said, “and it’s a very sad story because the mother just recently died.”

Immediately, my mother's heart melted. "I can't take a boarder right now—my life is too busy," she said. "But I can take another son."

I was seventeen at the time, the third child of four in the Eman family. My sister Stephana, whom we



Diet's parents

called Fanny, was the oldest at twenty-five. My brother Arjan—a very old Dutch name—was a year younger than Fanny. Then came the *kleintjes*, the little ones, me and my little brother, Albert, seven and eight years younger.

I personally didn't like the idea of another family member at all. We were a very happy family, and it seemed to me that having this strange guy in our house, a young man only a year older than I was, was nothing to get too excited about.

Hein Sietsma was his name, and he had been born in the town of Marum in Friesland. At the time he came to live with us, his father was the principal of a tiny Christian school in Holk, a place that was hardly a town at all—a little farming community just outside Nijkerk, Gelderland. When I was young, country places like Holk and Nijkerk seemed to me to be an entire age



Diet's brothers—Albert (l) and Arjan (r)

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away from life in the city, in The Hague, where my family and I had always lived.

I even disliked the name *Hein*. To me, it was some kind of backward farmer's name—something like “Old McDonald.” I was studying Spanish at the time, and I loved Spanish names like Ramon, for example. Wouldn't it be something, I thought, to fall in love with someone named Ramon? But Hein! Ach, a person named Hein in our home—and a male on top of it!

When my parents told me he was coming to live with us, I threw a fit. “I hate this,” I told them, “and his name is Hein, of all things!” I was sure he would be a regular Frisian bumpkin with freckles and red hair.

When this Frisian farm boy came to live with us, we put him in the study at the front of the house. In the Netherlands we had a kind of bed that I've never seen in the States, something called an *opklapbed*, a spare, wooden bed that appeared to be no more than a bookcase. It was very long and had curtains over it. When you opened the curtains, you flipped the bed out from the wall and laid it on the floor. So, naturally, this new member of our family slept in the *opklapbed*.

Shortly after Hein came to live with us, I discovered that he was actually a pretty nice young man. But I had to stick to my guns. I had made it very clear to everyone that his coming to our house was an invasion. I tried really hard not to like him—I really did. And having him there among us did indeed alter our ways a bit.

We didn't have any real bathrooms with tubs and showers—only sinks. Sometimes, in a rush, we had to wash right in the middle



Diet and her parents

of things, in the kitchen sink. Washing in public like that simply had to be done at times, just so everyone could make it to school or work on time. I'd run to the kitchen with little more on than my underwear, and I'd wash in the sink. With just our regular family there, my brother wouldn't even see me, if he happened to pass.

But when we had a strange fellow in the house, I couldn't do that anymore. Every morning I had to wait until I could wash up in my father and mother's bedroom, where there was a sink and I could wash in private. Every morning I had to wear a gown, once Hein came. So to me, Hein's becoming a member of our family—as my mother put it—meant making big changes. Nothing was ever the same again.

Hein worked at Shell Oil during the day, and he studied at night because he wanted to learn French. He had meals with us, and he went to church with us, and to the *Jongelingsvereniging*, the young men's society, where he met a whole bunch of new friends. In fact, once he started living with us, our house was always full of people. I had my friends, of course, and my brother Albert had his friends, and now Hein brought in a lot of new friends. We had a piano and an organ, and Albert, who was very musical, played the cello. (He always wanted to play music professionally; indeed, he was in an orchestra and played beautifully.) All of us would sing together, and it was a wonderful time. That time before the war, our house was always full of young people, full of happiness.

It was also 1937, when I was just seventeen, that I took my first job at a bank in the middle of the oldest part of The Hague. I had two really good friends, Rie and Jet, and on Saturdays we always went biking to the dunes along the coast or someplace out into the country. Rie and Jet, like me, were tomboys. We were still kids, and we did the craziest things.

The first time Hein asked me to go out biking with him on a Saturday, I said to my girlfriends, "Guess who asked me to go on a bicycle trip?" They just roared with laughter when I told them.

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“What did you say?” they asked.

“Why of course I told him no,” I said, almost as if offended by his having asked.

And the truth was I didn't want to go with him. Why should I, when every Saturday I was having so much fun with my own friends? Besides, I certainly wouldn't have admitted that I rather liked him, not after the fit I'd thrown when my parents announced he was moving in. I couldn't admit *that* for a long time.

But one Saturday afternoon in 1938, when my girlfriends couldn't go, I decided to take this Hein Sietsma up on another one of his invitations to go biking. So we went, the two of us. And we talked and talked and talked—which is something everyone did when biking in Holland: ride along for miles and talk.

“So how was it?” Rie and Jet asked when I saw them afterwards. “What happened?”

“Boring,” I told them,

And it was. With the girls I did crazy things. But Hein was a year older than I was, and he was obviously much more mature. With my girlfriends I climbed trees, jumped ditches, and had tomboy adventures. This date with Hein had been really low on adventure: it was dull, really; all we'd done was talk. Okay, he was a nice guy. But at that time of my life, I told myself, if I had to choose how to spend my Saturday afternoons, I would much prefer spending them with my friends.

Much later, my mother told me that Hein had spoken to her about me, had asked her what he could do to interest me. She had told him I wasn't ready for the kind of thing he was ready for; I was just a girl who thought real excitement was running in the woods and jumping *sloten*. I was certainly not interested in boys, especially those who did nothing more than ask boring questions. He told Mother he was crazy about me. “But it's like she doesn't even see me!” he said.

“Just slow down a bit,” my mother told him. “Diet is not



ready for this boyfriend business. Be patient,” she said, or words to that effect.

Of course, she didn’t tell me any of this at the time.

Hein came to live with us at the end of 1937, and for a long time he just observed me, I suppose. I was eighteen when I went biking with him for the first time. And then, after a year or so, he moved out of our house and in with some friends. Suddenly I missed him, though I never admitted it to anyone. All the friends still came over to our house, but soon Hein was gone for good. He had been drafted into the Dutch military service. It was a time when the whole world we lived in, so innocently full of happiness and children’s games, had become, suddenly, much more dangerous.

Everyone was being drafted. Hein was sent to Deventer, on the IJssel River just south of Kampen, not far from the German border. When he was there, I realized how much I cared about him. I realized I loved him. I figured it out when I knew that if something happened to him, I wouldn’t know how to handle it. He had tried to tell me he loved me in his own way, but I hadn’t paid any attention before the threat of war.

Hein would write my family from Deventer, and every family member wrote to him individually. But when I read his letters, I could feel the way he was reaching for something from me in particular, something to hold on to.



Hein, about 18 years old

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*December 13, 1939*

This morning I traveled from The Hague to Nijkerk, on leave. I don't know what to think of Diet. I had intended to talk a moment very seriously with her, all alone, while I was going to look into her beautiful eyes. That moment did not come.

Partly, she is a riddle to me. Next time better!

A woman is sometimes a riddle.

Diet is a tomboy, and mischievous.

*from the journal of Hein Sietsma*

All of the Netherlands was afraid in 1938, afraid because we could see what kind of power Hitler had already amassed. He had taken Austria when so many people thought he never would. We all believed England and France would certainly act at that time, but they didn't. When Hitler took Poland, we all understood that danger was on its way. We didn't know for sure when it would come, of course, but we could not deny our fear that something bad was about to happen.

When there is danger on your doorstep, you want to act almost like an ostrich burying its head in the sand. We liked to think that what had happened in Austria and Poland could not happen in the Netherlands. Maybe that was the only way to go on with life—denying, avoiding the worst possible thoughts.

I began to realize then how stupid I had been in not paying more attention when Hein was hinting that he loved me. So when I got a letter from him saying that on his next three or four days off he would love to come to The Hague and see me—not just my family—I wrote back immediately and told him, very carefully of course, that his coming to see me seemed to me like a very nice idea indeed.

That weekend, when I went to the railway station to meet him, my heart was nearly out of control. That was when I knew I

was in love with him. By then we had known each other for quite some time, but meeting him alone at the train station for the very first time, I felt as if I didn't want to lose this man, not ever. I knew then that I wanted him to be part of my life, and I understood, just from being with him, that he wanted the same for me.

We had more weekends like that first one, when Hein would come to The Hague on leave. We would talk and talk, and I found out what a really wonderful character he had. He had a great sense of humor. Sometimes we didn't have to say anything at all to each other, just stare into each other's eyes, and we would burst out laughing. But we also talked deeply and could be very serious. Our love grew. That first time we had gone biking together, when I was still a tomboy and Hein still seemed to me to be an intruder into our household, I had thought all his talk was boring. Something changed: I had fallen in love.



Diet, on one of the special weekend  
bike rides with Hein - 1939

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There were wonderful long bike rides together. We'd pack a lunch and have a picnic somewhere along the side of the road, at a spot with tall trees and beautiful scenery, somewhere along those *sloten*. We'd sit on the grass and eat our lunch—bread with cheese or peanut butter that we had made ourselves at home—and we'd drink our lemonade. There was no ice, of course, but that lemonade tasted wonderful right out of Hein's army canteen. Those were the best days, days when we could still have that kind of fun in 1938. Hein loved classical music, so we would go to concerts. For example, we heard Feike Asma, a very famous Frisian organist; and we always went to the St. Matthew's Passion.

We dated in a way that young people today might think very old-fashioned. Very few Dutch people could afford to be full-time students at that time—I was taking language classes—so we all had jobs, and in the evenings we would study on our own. Maybe on Saturday nights we would go to a concert or take a walk, if it was nice weather. Maybe we would simply visit friends. On Sundays we went to church and we would sit together; after church we had coffee together and dinner. Those were our dates. Hein loved to play chess and backgammon, and he taught me to play those games. That was our courtship, and that's how we fell in love—quietly but deeply.

My mother and father loved Hein like a son. Mother had a very hectic life—with both my friends and Hein's coming over all the time—but I know she loved all the activity. Whenever Hein got a weekend pass from the service, he would come to our house. This was often in preference to his own home, partly because Hein's father was a very, very strict man. Hein always respected his father, but sometimes he questioned his rather severe ways.

One day my father got a letter from Hein's father, who knew his son was about to receive a three-day leave that began on a Sunday. Hein had planned to hop on the train before church on Sunday morning, which meant, of course, that he would be traveling on the Sabbath. His father asked my father to refuse to admit Hein into our home because he thought Hein's taking the

Sunday train was sinful. My father wrote Mr. Sietsma back after Hein had spent the weekend with us: “I’m glad your son Hein came to The Hague and spent the day and went to church with us. I would have hated it if he had simply gone to a bar.”

Hein was, in fact, often angry with his father. But both of us could also understand his father’s ways. He was a man who was very sure of his ways, and he had a very large family, so large that his discipline had to be quite strict.

Hein tried to spread his leaves out so he could get to his family in Holk, but he knew he was never welcome at home if his leave began on the Sabbath. If he had only two days off, he would come to our house first. He knew that otherwise he would waste a whole day just having to avoid travel on Sunday.

We wrote each other very often. What I understand about myself now was that even though I was a tomboy when I was a girl, I was still something of an introvert. Even though I was often willing to be different, I found it very difficult to tell Hein exactly what I felt for him at that time. Maybe it took more courage than I had; maybe it was just something about us and about the time. It strikes me now that I was so very young when all of this was happening.

Hein seemed to find it much easier to be open and honest in expressing his feelings toward me. I couldn’t—I just couldn’t. Maybe my reluctance was just a part of my own old-fashioned ways: “Don’t ever show your feelings,” was the kind of forced exterior that is quite typical of the Dutch. Sometimes, I know, I must have seemed to him to be quite cold. But that first time he came to see me in The Hague, when he came to see just *me*, I kissed him. At that moment I somehow knew that what I felt for him was something that was not going to simply pass away. He kissed me too—yes, he did. That was quite an experience for me. It was wonderful that first weekend, and it was just the beginning.

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November 17, 1939

Katrientje is a cute, fresh young girl with red cheeks. Nice to talk to and she knows her place among the “young people.” A fun-type, a little tom-boyish.

But Diet has, apart from all these good qualities, also her childlike, simple faith and the inborn quality to see the good in everything. Conscious, or unconscious for her it is: “God is with me and therefore I am happy and try to look for the good in everybody, without pushing myself into the foreground.”

Why does she not write? Does she not know that I am aching for a letter, for a word from her?

Diet, are you coming tomorrow?

I want to hold you to my heart and tell you that I love you completely. I have seen that you love me, my all.

*from the journal of Hein Sietsma*



A view of the *Binnenhof*. Photo taken 1930-1939.

*United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*

It was 1939, and a number of our close friends had also fallen in love by that time. Johan Van Gelder, a friend Hein had met at our church, was engaged. And the other Johan, whom we called “Bram” to distinguish them from each other, was engaged to Nel, another friend. We were all deeply in love—all three couples. The girls loved each other too, and the guys were very good buddies. We had a wonderful world. Nel, Bram’s girl, also lived in The Hague. But Johan was from Amersfoort, and so was his fiancée, Fokje. She would come to The Hague some weekends to see him, and often she stayed with us. My parents’ house was like a hotel: one weekend it would be this young man or woman, the next someone else.



*November 20, 1939*

Birthday of Mr. Eman. Yesterday afternoon to The Hague. Made my own leave permit. Was at 4:30 p.m. in the Malakkastraat. Bram was also there. With Bram we went to pick Diet up from church. Diet and Rie don’t see us. We pass them and turn around and follow them. Still they don’t see us.

I hook my arm into hers.

*from the journal of Hein Sietsma*



*November 1939*

Sunday I had a big surprise. When I walked home from church, all of a sudden Hein was walking right next to me! I did not know what I saw!!

*from the diary of Diet Eman*

In the Netherlands, the fifth of December is called Sinter Klaas, and on that day we all make presents—sometimes silly, sometimes not—for our close friends and family. Once when we were swimming in the ocean, Hein had noticed that I was scared stiff of jellyfish. When the wind blew from a certain direction,

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hundreds of ugly blue jellyfish, it seemed, would come storming out of the sea. Some were huge, and they had horrible stinging tentacles. I was paralyzed with fear.

At the next Sinter Klaas, I was given a big wooden box; the note attached announced that it was a gift from Neptune, King of the Sea. In it was a big blob of jello. Hein had made a big blue jellyfish, and in the middle of that blob was a little bottle of my favorite perfume, *Maja*. He was a sweetheart, so often playing tricks like that. Sometimes when I went to bed at night—in those days you rolled your nightie under your pillow—I would grab my nightie and something would roll out, a box of perfume or an apple or something. He loved to play those little surprises, and they were always thoughtful.

We were all supposed to write poems to accompany our Sinter Klaas presents. Hein wrote a beautiful poem with that jellyfish present, a note that described how Neptune wept because I had been so afraid of one of the little creatures of his kingdom. I'll never forget it.

My sister was a young woman who liked high heels and hats and all such beautiful ladies' things. The guy she was dating was at our home one Sinter Klaas when everybody had a present for somebody. The rule was that the giver was supposed to wrap it up and write a poem, and the recipient had to read that poem aloud, whether he liked what it said or not. Sometimes, if one had a little habit that others found humorous or annoying, that little habit was likely to show up in the poem. But what was written was always playfully done, not something to make anyone furious. The gift might be just a little thing, but it was always wrapped deceptively in a big box, wrapped time and time again. Sometimes it had other people's names on each separate wrapping: on the outside the gift might say it was intended for Fanny, but once she opened the outside paper, she'd discover the next layer would say it was actually intended for Hein; then he would open it and say, "It's really for Father."

That year my mother had bought a beautiful lace brassiere for



Fanny, who loved lace. Now a bra was a very private thing in those days. But Mother always got mixed up when she wrapped things, so that present ended up—where would you guess?—right in the hands of my sister's new boyfriend. This young man was what we call in Dutch a *droogkomiek*: he had a very dry sense of humor. He opened the package, held up this beautiful lace bra, and said in a flat tone, "Ja, what am I supposed to do with this?"



December 5, 1939

Went on leave to The Hague last Sunday. The English church.

Yesterday we celebrated Sinterklaas.

Afterward in Diet's room. She was so beautiful: I don't think I ever saw her so beautiful.

When she says, "Why are you laughing, Hein?" and I look into her eyes which are always laughing when she looks up, I can only feel how wonderful it is that both of us have to laugh quietly when we look at each other. Sometimes we burst out laughing loudly, because we just can't say a thing.

When once there came a tear in her eye, I asked, "What's the matter, Diet?"

And she said, "I had to think of . . ."

I didn't ask any further.

But it was so wonderful to have such a girl with you, who trusts you, to know and to feel that she loves you and that she is yours.

Such a girl you can never harm or hurt. You think everything about her, her soul, herself—everything is wonderful and you don't want to ruin anything. That can't happen—it can never happen, fortunately. You only may love and make her happy, like she makes you happy.

Diet, when I think of you, I am so happy.

Lord, give that I may love her.

*from the journal of Hein Sietsma*

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For young people like us, times were different from what they are today. No young couples were married quickly in the Netherlands—certainly not immediately after they fell in love, or even right after they became engaged. They had to wait because they had to save money for furniture, for linens, for dishes, for all of their household needs. Usually, two or three years would pass before a couple would finally get married. And once they were, women usually did not work outside the home. Becoming man and wife depended on the husband's having a good job so he could support an entire family. There was not as much money or goods available in those post-Depression times. And for us, Hitler and the threat of war made everything even more unstable.



*October 31, 1939*

Today the thought continues to run through my mind that there is a good possibility the war will come to us also. I am always thinking that if it happened in *our* country it will be much worse than when it happens in other countries, but what makes us different from others?

If I think that Hein could be killed . . . now in Poland there will be girls who have lost their fiancés and women who will not see their husbands again here on earth.

O Father, console them and please spare our country from that terrible disaster, not because we are any better but only out of grace. And *if* it has to be different, then teach me to pray: "Your will be done."

O please protect him whom my soul loves!

*from the journal of Diet Eman*