This is Bram

Fifty years after WW II, a war child started a search for the woman who helped him survive the Hunger Winter of 1944/45

BY CORRIE TIMMER

"There's somebody on the phone for Mrs Tromp." That was in the summer of 1996. Duut (Dieuwertje) Tromp-Stuurman was chatting with a friend over a glass of wine in the lounge of their hotel on the Isle of Wight when Erna, her daughter-in-law, phoned her and said: "Mum, 'Brammetje' is looking for you!" That message came as a real bombshell, and all of a sudden she was back in July 1944, in the Dutch Reformed Church in the village of Berkhout, Holland, where she heard the vicar call upon the congregation from his pulpit: "People in our capital Amsterdam are starving. Without your help, many children won't survive the coming winter months." Duut Stuurman, who was 20 at the time, felt a sudden surge of maternal feelings. What woman could resist such an appeal?

In 1944, the vicar at the Dutch Reformed Church in the village of Berkhout (top) called upon his congregation to take in hungry children from Amsterdam. This is how Bram Lüttger (right) found temporary shelter during the war

PHOTOGRAPH: JOLANTHE LALKENS/GALAHAD

She had just been offered a job as a milk inspector at the Noord-Holland Provincial Agricultural Centre in Alkmaar, but she was unable to get there. There had been no public transport service for quite some time. She was afraid she would lose her job, but that did not mean she had run out of options. After all, she had been trained as a nursery school teacher.

"I wouldn't mind taking one in," she responded spontaneously. "Just send me the smallest one, a toddler." The days went by and she almost forgot having made the offer, but one late afternoon two months later somebody knocked at the door of her parental home. When she opened she saw an emaciated man, deadly tired, with a bike and a wobbly, dark-grey baby buggy fastened to it. "I understand you volunteered to look after a child," he said hesitantly. "This is Bram."

Initially Duut was dumbstruck, but she soon recovered and invited the man in. "Let me pull in the pram," she said. The man dropped into a chair near the table and closed his eyes. The trip all the way from Amsterdam on solid tyres and the constant threat of being arrested by the Germans had taken it out of him. He was exhausted and faint with hunger. While the cities were starving, people in the countryside still had plenty to eat, and Duut offered the man some food. He tucked in ravenously. In the meantime she glanced under the hood of the decrepit buggy and felt her heart open up. What she saw was the sweetest little blond boy, with a pair of beautiful eyes staring at her in amazement. "He's so sweet!" she said.

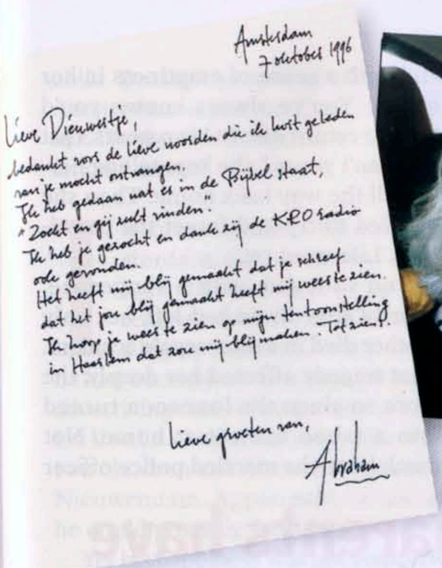
The man did not respond and showed no emotion of any kind. She thought he might not have heard her, and wondered who he was. Surely he was not the boy's father, considering the distant way he behaved. Perhaps he was a neighbour? She did not dare to ask. There was a war going on, and it was best not to know too much about things. It would be OK.

After having rested for a while, the man got up and prepared to leave. He said very little and did not as much as glance at the buggy even once. Duut remembered seeing him ride slowly down the path, a pair of drooping shoulders in a worn coat.

Duut had asked for a small child, but this one was very small. A breastfed child! She consulted her GP, Dr Van der Linde, who advised her to feed the boy on diluted cow's milk with sugar, and to add wheatmeal porridge in a week or so. Duut went home feeling quite relieved. *We're so lucky*, she thought, *that we are still able to acquire the things we need here in the countryside.*

BACK home she wrapped the boy in a blanket and placed him on her father's lap, while she and her mother emptied the buggy. Under the mattress they discovered ten washed nappies and a note: "For the people who will look after Abraham."

"Abraham. So he's Jewish!" Duut and her mother said in unison. They


Amsterdam
7 oktober 1996

Lieve Dieuwertje,
bedankt voor de lieve woorden die ik kort geleden van je mocht ontvangen.
Ik heb gedaan wat er in de Bijbel staat,
"Zoekt en gij zult vinden".
Ik heb je gezocht en dank zij de KRO radio ook gevonden.
Het heeft mij blij gemaakt dat je schreef dat het jou blij gemaakt heeft mij weer te zien.
Ik hoop je weer te zien op mijn tentoonstelling in Haarlem dat zou mij blij maken. Tot ziens!

Lieve groeten van,
Abraham

After some letters and a phone call, Bram and Duut met after more than half a century: an emotional and happy reunion

realised they had better be extra careful about him, to keep him out of the Germans' clutches. *He's lucky to be blond*, they thought.

Duut's neighbours did whatever they could to help and offered her all sorts of things: clothes, a baby chair, a playpen, a little bed. The old buggy in which Abraham had arrived almost fell apart, so Mrs Stam, the woman next door, offered Duut her own buggy, "Here child, take this. I've no need for it right now."

Little Bram was oblivious to all the attention he got. Despite his bad start, he was quite strong and healthy, and he grew fast. The country air worked miracles and made his cheeks bloom. Duut took him out for a walk whenever she had time, guarded scrupulously by her parents' big dog, a St Bernard. The dog appeared to regard himself as the little boy's protector.

On nice days she used to sit in the garden behind her spinning wheel, with Bram in the playpen at her side. He chatted and laughed and his little face got a nice, healthy colour.

Duut's skilled hands created a cute jersey for the boy and a coat made up of different patches. After five years of war, all sorts of materials were in short supply and basic tasks such as preparing food, mending clothes and making soap took up a great deal of time. Electric light was a past luxury; in the evenings Duut worked in what light she could conjure up from a taper floating in a little bowl of salad oil. To save water she first washed Bram's nappies in the ditch before properly cleaning them in suds. And all the while she thought of Bram's parents, wondering whether they were still alive. If they weren't, what would happen to Bram? She was a level-headed

girl, however, and forced herself not to worry too much about these things.

Winter turned into spring. Holland was liberated on May 5, 1945 and Duut expected visitors from Amsterdam every day. She couldn't help looking at the path that led up to the farm, to see if anyone was approaching to take her little boy back home. But the days passed and nobody came to claim Bram. *So perhaps his parents have died after all*, Duut thought. In that case, might Bram stay? It was not until June, weeks after the liberation, that the vicar came over, carrying with him a message from the Red Cross. "Will the people who have been taking care of a child from Amsterdam please take their foster son or daughter to the Red Cross boat in Hoorn." So the dreaded moment had come: Bram would have to be sent back.

So perhaps his parents have died after all, Duut thought. In that case, might Bram stay...?

Duut bathed him for the last time, put him in his best jersey and bundled up all the other clothes she had so lovingly made. Then she hugged him for the last time. *Will I ever see him back?* she wondered. "Farewell, little boy," she said.

On the gangway to the boat a nurse picked up the child and took him on board without any further ado. Duut stood on the quayside empty-handed and with a sense of emptiness in her heart. "You've always known you'd have to return him to his parents, that he wasn't yours," she kept telling herself all the way back home. Then she decided to try and forget the emptiness. Life went on.

And so it did, with a vengeance. Shortly after Bram had left, her only brother died in a motorcycle accident. That tragedy affected her deeply, the more so since the loss soon turned into a taboo subject at home. Not much later she married police officer Henk Tromp, but the day after the marriage her mother-in-law had a stroke. The young couple moved in with her to look after her. Sitting next to her mother-in-law, Duut would often take up her knitting and work like mad, producing one pair of little pants after the other. Subconsciously she was still looking after Bram. Six weeks later, her honeymoon ended with the funeral of her mother-in-law. Before long, Henk was offered a post in De Cocksdorp, a village on the island of Texel, and they left the province of Friesland.

Duut and Henk had five children, four sons and a daughter. Despite her busy life, Duut kept thinking of little Bram. After all, he had been her first

child. During the time of the riots in Amsterdam in the sixties, she would ask Henk: "Do you reckon Bram is among them?"

In the meantime, back in Amsterdam, the small boy, Abraham Lüttger, grew up and reached adulthood. Thanks to a highly successful early career he had become art director at a major advertising firm when he was only 24. He lived a wonderful life, had a wife, two children and a beautiful house in Nieuwendam. Apparently, he had all he could possibly wish for.

Yet his happiness was not complete. There was a vague sense of discontent, an indefinable lack of fulfilment that kept growing. *What am I doing with my life? Am I happy? I have everything, and still...* The incessant focus on appearances became unbearable and in 1978 Bram, trained as a designer, radically changed his life and opted for a career as an independent artist. The end of his advertising career also signified the end of his marriage. Financially, life as an artist proved highly unpredictable, but Bram did manage to establish a reputation and had exhibitions in Moscow, Tokyo, Berlin, Warsaw, Paris and New York. Artistically he evolved from figurative to abstract painting, tapping "the source of universal consciousness, passing on the things revealed to me".

A celebrated artist, Abraham wanted to be entirely independent. Then, in the late 1980s, he was suddenly knocked down by severe back aches and could hardly move his limbs. There he was, laid low, alone and unhappy. "It's as though all my life I've been trying to achieve things to prove that I'm worthy to be loved," he concluded.

Why is it so difficult for me to meaningfully communicate with people? Is there anything in my youth to explain that? These thoughts brought to mind the story a relative had told him years ago, when he was a teenager, about his having been placed in foster care during the war. He knew very little about what had happened, and the subject had never been discussed at home. However, when he had grown up his elder sister Josephine, who had witnessed those traumatic events as a ten-year-old girl, had repeatedly urged Bram to try and find the woman who had looked after him, to thank her for her help. "You can comfortably ignore those things, Bram, but the fact that you're busy is simply no excuse. And the argument that it's mum and dad who ought to have thanked those people is rubbish. It's you; you owe your life to that woman. It's nobody else's duty but yours!"

Gradually, something changed inside Bram. He began to paint hearts in all shapes and sizes, and eventually found the key to his own heart. After a successful period in Paris, he fell into a deep depression, which made work so difficult for him that eventually he was forced to face the inevitable. It was clear that he could not go on with his life and his work unless that empty space in his past was

filled and unless the debt of gratitude his sister had so effectively exposed was redeemed. He resolved to look for his foster mother. *I'll go and try to find her. Right now. I need to finish a job that's been overdue for years. I need to do what Josephine told me to do, and thank that woman of my own accord for having saved my life. She's a stranger to me, but I need her to tell me what happened, what she did and why she did it.*

BRAM began his search in the spring of 1996, just when Duut embarked on a nostalgic voyage to Indonesia, calling at all the traditional ports along the route to the former Dutch East-Indies. Of her fellow travellers, all over 50, more than half had lived in Indonesia before Sukarno seized power, and had been interned by the Japanese during the Second World War. Not surprisingly, the passengers frequently reminisced about the war and one day Duut told her story about Bram. The memories came back so vividly that she kept talking about Bram even after the trip, until one day her children asked, "What would you say if we tried to find that little boy for you?"

Duut was hesitant. "Oh, you know, it's such a long time ago. I'm no longer the girl I used to be, and Bram is no longer the little Bram in my playpen. What's he supposed to do with an old woman like me? Just let it be." She tried not to think of the subject.

By that time, Bram's quest had run into difficulties. Josephine did not know the foster family's name, and he could not ask his parents any more. But then he thought of a show on TV, *Address: Unknown,* in which people get help in tracking down long-lost contacts. What did he know? What information about the woman could he trace just to have something to go by? He entered the show with a few key words: farm household, Berkhout and a big St Bernard. In the end it was the dog that put him on the track towards Dieuwertje.

An elderly lady, Mrs Barten from Zuid-Scharwoude, who lived in Berkhout during the war, could remember that dog very well because, due to his size, he had been quite a sight in the small farming community. "The Stuurman family used to have a dog like that, and I know that their daughter did look after an infant boy during the Hunger Winter," she told the programme organisers. "If I'm not mistaken, she married a policeman after the war and moved to Texel." After some research, the *Address: Unknown* team soon produced the right address and Abraham was overjoyed when he got their message, "Duut, Dieuwertje, Stuurman is still alive. No, she does not want to appear on the show or come to the studio, but she would certainly like to meet you."

IT was Sunday evening, almost ten o'clock. Duut was walking up and down the room nervously and kept looking at her watch. She had been told that Bram would call her at ten

that evening. She felt apprehensive about their first conversation. What were they supposed to say to each other? It was all so strange, after so many years. She did not have to wait long, because at ten o'clock sharp the phone rang. She felt her heart pounding in her chest, lifted the receiver and said, "Hello, little Bram."

He responded, "Little Bram? I've grown up. I'm 52. I'm Abraham now."

"My name is Dieuwertje Boukje Stuurman," she said.

"What do you remember about me?"

"Your beautiful eyes," Duut answered.

"Don't you want to see me?" he asked.

So there she was, a few days later, on the quayside in a red jacket, standing next to her Mercedes and waiting for the ferry. When it had come in, the passengers streamed down the stairways and flooded the quay – hundreds of them. How could she tell who was Abraham? She scanned the crowd and suddenly, in a flash, she spotted a man looking around at the top of the stairs. She knew it instantly: that's Bram! He saw her at exactly the same moment and they walked towards each other, maintaining eye contact. Then they met.

They stood there a few seconds, not knowing what to do or say, studying each other's face: was this the woman who had looked after him during the war? Was this the little boy she had taken in half a century ago? "I'm so happy," he kept repeating when they were driving to her home in De Cocksdorp. "Finally the puzzle is solved. Dieuwertje, thanks for having saved my life."

SINCE that first meeting Duut and Abraham have kept in contact with each other, and they take turns in crossing to or from Texel to have a chat. "We've become part of each other's lives. Of our own accord, quite naturally and all the more pleasantly for that reason," says Abraham.

Abraham Lüttger's paintings are exhibited at the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum, various municipal art libraries in Amsterdam and in several corporate art collections.

To view some of his art please visit www.art-fusion-amsterdam.com.

GENDER BENDER

Asked during a radio interview how she went from writing romance novels to mysteries, author Janet Evanovich answered, "I hit menopause and began to have more thoughts of murder than romance."

JO CARR