Dunya Breur

A heart-to-heart with my father[1]

Dunya Breur, born 1942 during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, spends the greater part of her infancy, together with her mother and other imprisoned women, in the prison cells of Scheveningen and Utrecht, after her father had been arrested for resistence activities.
Her father, Krijn Breur, who had fought as a volunteer in the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, is condemned to death and executed in 1943. Her mother is deported to the concentration camp Ravensbrück, to be freed only by the Russian Army in 1945. Dunya is rescued from prison by her grandmother and thus saved from deportation. Thus she grows up with one set of grandparents, while her brother is raised by the other.
Of the painful aspects of their own history the children are kept in the dark. Her father is a kind of void, caused by the heavy and leaden silences which ensue whenever his name is mentioned. Dunya is in her late twenties before she finally summons the courage to explore the facts for herself. Bit by bit she discovers who her father was and what he had stood for.
The search for her unknown father finds its culmination and end in a fictional and moving dialogue with him. But a Heart-to-Heart with my father is more than just the story of a daughter on a quest to discover an unknown father – it is also a frank discussion of the consequences of the Second World War and the Cold War upon subsequence generations, on the conflicts of loyalties and the emotional turmoil which the war left in the minds of the 'Child Survivors' and the 'Second Generation'.

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1 Dunya Breur: A Heart-to-Heart with my father (Een gesprek met mijn vader), 160 p. Publisher: BOOM/SUN, Prinsengracht 747-751, 1017 JX Amsterdam/Netherlands. Tel.: (0031)20- 6226 107; Fax: (0031)20- 6252 327, h.hoeks@uitgeverijsun.nl https://www.uitgeverijboom.nl/boeken/geschiedenis/een_gesprek_met_mijn_vader_9789058750112/

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Summer had come. It had become warm, light and sunny. We were on vacation. I blinked against the sunlight like a cat that had sat too long in the dark. It was overwhelming, the warmth, the cheer, the pleasure, the high spirits of my children, who treated this as if it were the first summer of their lives.

It was towards evening. We walked along the beach. My children and their father walking ahead. We were in Brittany, on an island. The sea was clear, crystal-clear like tap-water, as I hadn't seen the sea for a long time. My children were loving it; they'd never been this far from home before. They'd never seen a beach like this, seashells as beautiful as this before.

Far from home one gets things into a clearer perspective.

I didn't often join in on their walks. I'd got used to burying myself behind the typewriter. But this time I'd gone along – to the joy of friend and children. The evening was quiet, although the sound of the monotonously roaring surf drowned out everything. The waves attacked the beach and then retreated, again and again, incessantly. Against the dune all kinds of wild plants bloomed which my friend could name, although it was beyond me. It was quiet on the beach; we were the only people in sight.

The war had not left the island untouched. Not that there were visible traces – bunkers or somesuch – but at the village grocer I'd found a booklet in which the islanders told their story. Once you got to know the locals better you began to notice something else as well: the invisible spaces. The murdered fathers, the dead children, the unknown uncle, grandfather, mother and grandmother, the sister killed. You begin to notice the people who bear the names of those they had never known, of whose lives they had heard nothing but fragments. Here also, amongst the inhabitants of the island of which there was not a single one I knew really well, there were those who did not really know after whom they had been named, who had – frightened by their parents' emotions – never really dared to ask.

My youngest son runs with great abandon into a bit of that glitteringly coloured, eternal ocean.

And what do I do? – I think to myself. What about me? I hardly see the sea, all these years I'd hardly noticed it. I look at it, but see in it rather the mirror of my own thoughts. I don't look at the sunlight; I see instead how rapidly my children are growing up, see the look of my friend change, but

what I really see are the empty spaces. I see them, I search them out, I look for them in the silences when I hear people speak. But why? Why?

I look at the sea, and I think: why do I do that? Why do I search out those empty places? Because of the void in me: my dead and inscrutable father. That empty space which, all my life, I had so carefully skirted. Everyone kept up the pretence – so it seemed to me – that it was unimportant. Obedient and trusting as I always was, I thought: no doubt they're right. They've thought about this, and they have my best interests at heart. Nowadays I think that no-one had paid much thought to this at all, that everyone was immersed in his/her own grief, and I've stopped believing that everyone had only my best interests at heart.

People were envious of me sometimes, since I was a cheerful and bright child that had not experienced the war. Yes, people thought bitterly: you, but not me. Or perhaps they thought: you, but not your father. I was still alive – I couldn't help that. And that bitter look I intercepted – I didn't understand. But what I did understand was: people weren't very pleased with me.

And I understood that cheerfulness and brightness were not approved of, were for some reason or other unfitting. Permissible was: to fight for a better world.

The sun was almost setting. I looked at the waves, and thought to myself: that empty space, that's what I've been busy with all my life. At first it bothered me greatly, then I filled it up with dreams, with „Letters to my father", with all kinds of notions of which I had no idea whether they made any sense. Later on, when I'd become more courageous and could face the disappointment which it would cause me and others, I went searching for reality and certitude, for facts about my father. And that empty space came increasingly to dominate my life.

Why can't I let it go?

Because I'm not done with it yet, but also because I'm not capable of doing so. I look at the sea and the waves. Because I would then feel that I had joined all those that had forsaken them, had left them in the lurch, those twenty men shot dead on the fifth of February 1943. While life simply went on. Unbeknownst to anyone, not their wives, not their parents, not their friends. No-one knew about it; they'd been allowed a brief letter, to be posted only after their death. The murder must undoubtedly have been a fascinating spectacle for the camp administration (the administration liked to watch executions.) Their bodies were thrown into a pit, earth shovelled over the top, then stamped down flat.

The place had to remain hidden, the family to be informed only much later, the papers were not to report about the execution, the names of the killed had to be forgotten.

I knew nought of all this at the time, but somehow the length of my ignorance translated one day into a heavy weight on my mind. The more I dwelt on the despair of their final days and final hours, the more I tried to do something about it in my helplessness, while knowing full well that it was impossible. To distance myself from that despair seemed treasonable.

I can let go alright, I know I can, but I don't want to! – I realized as I looked at the waves and at the north shore of the island in Brittany.

The horizon, far beyond the sea, was a line of bright light that was constantly changing. Far in the distance a ship was visible. A bird veered above us; high in the sky a gull.

I don't want to let go, I thought; that would feel like a betrayal of my father. As if I were abandoning him at a time when, waiting for his death, he was already so desperately alone. In some peculiar way I wanted to remain true to him, remain loyal to him, cushion somehow some of what he had gone through. I wanted to reach him, rescue him, grab him by the hand, pull him back to life. But that's impossible, as I know very well. Dead is dead – that's how it was then, that's how it is now.

I wanted to do what everyone around him neglected to do: to call him by his name, enshrine his photograph in a place of honour, decorate his grave with flowers, pass on his words, visit his friends, treasure his memory, as a counterweight to the maltreatment he had suffered during his lifetime.

The sea simply goes on assaulting the beach, murmuring and roaring and withdrawing, not in the least bit bothered by our thoughts. Pounding the beach to pieces, bearing along dead animals, casting them back onto the shore somewhere. The sea just glitters and shines and reflects imperturbably in the sun. It's all in me, all these ruminations – in me, my friend and my children. They see that I don't join in when they want to enjoy themselves, without understanding why. Soon, on my birthday, I'll be almost twice the age my father ever reached. Would he have been pleased if he'd known that I would spend my whole life wrestling with his death?

It would have shocked him to death.

I'll never find what I'm looking for. If I were to start to dig in the sand, there where the tombstone bearing his name stands, I'll find merely sand and stone, and eventually the remains of a body I'd never seen and never knew. Is that then what I've been searching for? No.

I looked at the sea, at the sun setting in the distance, at the colours of the light constantly in flux, at the three people walking ahead of me, thinking:

it's my own choice. I'm capable of relinquishing these thoughts with which I fill my days and nights, but I don't want to.

I don't want to see the sun and the sea and the sky. I want to search for something which is not there, for someone who doesn't exist. I can't stop this quest.

I may not forget him, with me simply carrying on living. This obsessed me three summers long.

Life simply went on. The anxious children that I had deposited at the kindergarten, where I'd left them glancing uncertainly at the other children, these children always grateful and relieved when I came to get them, these children were growing up. In the public garden they played aggressive games with each other and with other children of the class; they had outgrown the kindergarten. They came home with caterpillars and all manner of other strange beasties, out on the street they played with the children of the neighbourhood, and I no longer had to sit anxiously by their side on a chair. They simply grew up. Gradually they also would have to face up to this life, learn to deal with it.

My papers started to pile up. Information on the Parool group, thirteen members of which had been gunned down together with my father, on the AJC[??], which had long since ceased to exist, on the Spanish Civil War, on the wartime CPN [Dutch Communist Party] on the population registration office of Gerrit van der Veen, on the concentration camp Ravensbrück, on the concentration camps in Schoorl, Amersfoort and Vught, on the prisons in Scheveningen and Utrecht, on the raid on the clothing factory Hollandia-Kettenburg in Amsterdam North on eleven November 1942. But for some reason, I could not see the connection to the arrest of my parents (and me) on 19 November 1942 .

The pile of paper grew higher, but for some reason or other nothing fitted. The paper clippings turned yellow and brittle, and each year one or more books would be added which in some way or other I could place in the context of that which I was searching for. On flea markets, in used-books shops and via acquaintances I'd find books and newspaper articles published when I was still a child, and not yet clear where I would have to go in my search to fill up the void in our lives. Those I hadn't then been able to read. But really come to some kind of conclusion, some kind of final stocktaking, no, not that.

Piet was a great source of support. Old Piet – now ninety one years old – still watching football on television with passion, who was sober and always stayed that way, who could distinguish between emotions, practical problems and global politics with so little effort – much better than I could.

Why can't I let it go, I asked myself, when the children were playing outside. Why can't I devote myself to some other subject? Something more cheerful?

I knew that I couldn't do that, without being able to express in words why it was not possible. If there was something on television or in the papers, a new book published or some new information about the Second World War had emerged, there was no need for me to make a choice at all. Something within me had long since made that choice, and I had my nose in the material long before anyone else had noticed anything, had ferreted it out almost before I'd gone looking for it.

It was a force in me that was greater than I had myself mostly been aware off. I had already found and read it before others even knew that there was something of importance to be dug up. Everything else I neglected – let things take care of themselves. This alone I clutched at. This alone was what really occupied me. Why?

My house became a mess. Gradually it filled up with material – with letters, books, newspapers and other papers. The pile of books I had on the Second World War and on the Spanish Civil War grew to impressive proportions.

My children attended swimming lessons, music lessons, judo lessons, and I tried despite everything to carry on with ordinary, day-to-day things. To resign myself to never finishing off what I had started off to do: not only that I would never find my father – that of course I knew perfectly well – but also that I would in all likelihood never discover why the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogs-documentatie [Royal Institute of War Documentation] forced my mother and I into an eight-year long legal battle – with the support of two advocates – before finally giving us an uncensored and complete copy of my father's death sentence; and that I would never succeed in finding out just what exactly my father's role had been in the war, what precisely he had done, and how he – betrayed or not – had been arrested and interrogated, sentenced and killed.

I'll never find out. But it's so difficult to resign myself to it! After the almost fifty years that have now passed by, many things have taken on a different complexion. What back then was very difficult and aroused deep feelings in others, has in the meantime lost much of that emotional power. The do's and don't of back then no longer apply. In the meantime so much of what back then had been meant to be kept secret has come to light – of crimes, broken promises, failings on the part of all kinds of people at difficult moments – that it's become an effort to recapture the emotions they once aroused.

People come and go; babies become cute little fellers, look you more and more directly in the eye, begin to laugh and begin to discover life as it now is. They learn new songs at school; the countless empty lots all over the place have long since been built up with new houses, bridges and streets, filled up with new ideas and new things. Some notions they get all mixed up – the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War for instance – and that has something endearing about it. You realize with a shock that what to you was so important can never be passed on to the next generation with all the bits and pieces that belong to it.

The bell didn't work any more. The dawn was breaking. It had become dawn so often. And so often evening. Only in music did I sometimes find it again: all those manifold ways of dealing with grief.

I agonize my mind into a frazzle to try to find some positive aspect to all that grief – it was paralysing me.

„What exactly?"

Again I hear a voice. But I'm simply sitting behind the typewriter, as always. I look around me. I see nothing.

„Can't you phone?" I ask. „As you did then?"

„You know yourself that it can't be true, and that I don't exist", my father answers.

Vaguely I see a thin, calm man sitting opposite me.

„Why did you come back?" I ask.

„I'd forgotten something", my father said.

I contemplate that.

„Your glass of wine!" I venture.

„Right", says my father. „My glass of Spanish wine! I couldn't drink up, and I'll never be able to drink up. You drink it up! But to sit there ruining your life because of me, that you mustn't do! That has no sense at all. Take care that your grief doesn't dominate you and paralyse you!"

„Easier said than done", I mutter.

It's Sunday now. Six days ago I sang at the cremation of Jo Vis. The song Die Gedanken sind frei!, thoughts are free! But thoughts are also free to head off at each moment in that ominous direction of paralysis and anguish. That direction of: I'll just let things drift along, let things slide, lock the door and crawl into bed, sag into my chair and stare vacantly into space.

„I was imprisoned against my will, but you lock yourself up as a matter of choice. It looks almost like a form of solidarity!", I hear my father's voice again.

„That's what it feels like", I confess. „As if I'm doing justice to what it is that has taken place, to all that suffering that happened."

„But you don't reach us that way!" says my father. „It's meaningless! For other people its painful to see. You're still so young! You still have so many possibilities, you still could achieve so much!"

„I type", I say.

„Yes", responds my father. „But you must also live!"

„That's what you said in your farewell letter!", I say. „Those were your last words!"

„Dear child", says my father. „You have long since left childhood behind you, you have children of your own. You have to look ahead, instead of only looking back. Try, however you can, to break through the paralysis. It pains me to see you like this. So sad, so reflective, in the midst of so much chaos around you."

He sits there a long time, just looking. I follow his gaze. It wanders from the overfilled and messy bookcases to the window, to the water of the Amstel canal outside – because it has now dawned, it has become light, and the curtains are open. He looks again at all the papers lying in the messy piles all over my desk, and then at me, motionless behind the typewriter.

„Why did you start with all of this?" he asks. „With this return to the past, to my death, to our imprisonment and your mother's deportation?"

„Because I didn't understand my own reactions", I said. „I noticed that the past meant much more to me than I initially realized. As if the war, which I hadn't even experienced consciously myself, were much more important than everything else. And on top of that I was of course curious about you!

And not just curious; I'd also had enough of all the carping. I simply wanted someone who would back me up as a matter of principle, even before he knew what it was that I was up to. Simply someone who listened to what I had to say, without having his opinions all lined up even before he knew what it was all about. Simply someone who sees me sitting there, someone fond of me, whether I'm good or bad, cheerful or not. That's what I needed."

„Do you know what you need to do?", says my father, „You need in the end to stop worrying about what other people think about you! Stop thinking about the reactions of everyone around you, simply follow your own inclination, your own will, your own ideas and thoughts. You're not obliged constantly to be responsible to everyone all of the time for your actions, not even mentally. You're fine the way you are, don't let yourself be dragged along by everything and everybody! People often just chatter along, they don't always mean what they say, they often don't think about it at all. You

don't always have to take account of other people! That's often, for that matter, not even possible!"

I'm astonished that he should see it that way. That much I'd never revealed about myself to anyone.

„There's something that I don't understand", he continues. „What is it that you reproach your mother for?"

„What do you mean", I ask.

„I hear it in the tone of your voice", he says. „You're bitter when you speak of her. But she saved your life!"

„That's probably right, I see it that way myself", I say. „But she was always so hard, always with that tinge of cynicism. Always treating me as an oversensitive toddler too dumb to understand anything. And on the subject of you she was always silent. Confidentiality was not a word that applied to us."

„But you can't stay with that forever!" he cries out. „I stopped bothering about my parents when I was nineteen, when I took off for Spain without them even knowing. Your parents are surely not that important – not even me – that you should devote your entire life to them? That you should allow your entire life to be influenced by that? That's surely nuts? I didn't ask that of you, and I'll never ask that of you!"

I look at him. He's probably right. And I say:

„I've said it before, but quarrelling with you, how marvellous that seems to me!"

„Yes", he says, „that's what you say now, but you never actually do it. What in God's name has got you in its grip?"

„Authority!" I say. „Authority and respect. Fear, fear of what you went through in that cell. As if through that I have no right to speak out, not now, not at all."

„What nonsense!" reacts my father. „What rot, dammit! What childish rubbish! Suffering surely doesn't elevate you above everyone else! I don't over-tower you that much! I would have liked to stand beside you, but that is not how it turned out. You must not let your life be determined by grief and mourning. Not all too long, at any rate. And start clearing up all this rubbish! You'll get nowhere this way. You keep being bogged down in something you don't want to do. It is as if you are imprisoned in grief."

„That's what it feels like to an extent", I say.

We look at each other again, both of us have to laugh, grimace, somewhere between laughing and crying. The shadows in my room grow.

„No", starts my father again, „they are not shadows!"

„That's what I thought!" I say astonished. „I didn't utter that at all! You couldn't have heard that!"

I hear the clock in my room ticking gently. Outside there is not a sound to be heard. My eyes hurt. From staring? My right shoulder also hurts.

Where am I? I think. What's the matter? Where were we, my father and I? I hear only the ticking of the clock.

„You're hearing simply the ticking of the clock", says my father.

„Do you recognize that clock?" I ask. „This one, here above my head?"

„Where did you get it?" my father asks. „It doesn't come from my own parents."

„No", I say, „its from the house of your in-laws, from the house of my other grandfather, my grandfather who looked at you with fear in his heart. It's from the cobbler's shop. When I slept there, for instance when they had visitors from Friesland, they would sit in the back room – I remember them quarrelling – and then the clock would hang above my head. It really is the same clock!"

I'm terribly pleased about that clock. I like its tranquil ticking. It's on top of that an ordinary clock, you have to wind it up. If you don't do that it will stand still. My house is full of batteries large and small, empty or petering out. I don't like electronics. I don't understand it, and I dislike it, just as I do electricity. This clock I can tackle, it I can understand, it I can handle. My brother, my mother, and now already also my sons are much more technical than I am.

Is my father still there?

I drift off in my thoughts. I've often wondered if he was just as a-technical as I was. And often thought that that must indeed have been the case. I like languages and music, but not electronics, gadgets of all kinds that just as you've got used to them and dependent on them suddenly give up the ghost.

It's light, it's been light a long time. I feel that he's still there, but I don't know for sure.

„Did you ever think you were going crazy?", I hear my father asking.

„Yes!", I say. „Certainly".

„When the present and the past started to become too entangled, and I was over-immersed in my own world, and barely noticed what was happening around me, then I sometimes thought, as I became aware of other people's reactions: what's the matter? But at the same time I thought: I can't really care a damn what's going on. What I'm busy doing now I find important, even if others think I'm not doing a goddam thing. Let me have

my own way, it'll be all right. And pour me another glass of wine now. That is what I came back for!", says my father.

„That I don't believe!", I say.

„No", says my father, „but it's true."

He looks long and thoughtfully at everything around him. Looks again at the books, the papers, the photos and clutter on the wall. The telephone, television, papers, sofa, and also the chair of which I'd always thought that he had once sat in it, but which he hadn't mentioned.

„The night has passed", my father remarks.

„For you it has never passed", I say. „And for me it's long passed. But I like the night!"

The form in front of me is now as transparent as the light outside. The night has passed. The song, once sung by so many people – how many of them were still alive? – I saw printed here on one of the many India paper pages from a small battered booklet, with musical notes, and in every edition of that booklet – Canciones de guerra, 'Songs of war' – the song is rendered slightly differently. Longer, changed. Just as life itself becomes longer, shorter, battered, lost, changed, to end – and then to start anew.

The night has passed – but something like it returns every evening.

„What are you busy with?", asks my father.

„I don't know", I say. „Just thinking".

[transl. Frederik van Gelder]