

The vulnerable bruiser

by Laurie Martin, 2023

He was born just 13 years ago at the height of World War two but already felt weary every day with the weight he carried on his shoulders. Two days ago, he killed a boy from the neighbourhood. Now he worried the police would soon be coming for him.

On a cold day in January 1941, his mother and father welcomed him into the world in the Dutch city of Eindhoven. His father named him Gustav after the composer Mahler. Like his father, Mahler was an Austrian Jew. Unlike his father, Mahler was known and admired widely across Europe. His father hoped little Gustav would benefit from that talisman.

That same month the Germans invaded. The following month, his father, despite being Austrian, was deported as part of a small group of Dutch Jews to Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp after being identified as Jew by Dutch police collaborating with the Germans.

The war ended about four months before his fifth birthday so his strongest memories of it were local. The stray bombs which landed in nearby streets causing damage to houses, shops and people. The appearance of a flash new car overnight outside the house next door. His favourite was a bright red Citroën Traction Avant. Not only was it sleek and shiny but the colour was such a contrast to the dull blacks, blues and greys of most other cars.

The family also had five girls he often heard singing accompanied by lots of laughter.

On Friday nights Gustav's smaller family kept Shabbat.

Next door on Friday nights, the father drank beer and smoked cigars while listening to loud classical music. Ironically, one of his favourite operas was Verdi's *Nabucco* which, according to Gustav's mother, follows the plight of the Jews as they are exiled from their homeland. The father's most listened to movement from that opera was the *Hebrew Slaves Chorus*.

The neighbouring family also included a single boy. He called the boy The Kid. He was a year younger than Gustav and seemed to be a golden child who wasn't saddled with household chores and wandered about the neighbourhood playing at whatever took his fancy.

When Gustav was seven, the postman delivered three letters one day. The first letter insisted they get their rent up to date or be evicted. The second letter was from a distant aunt telling them of the passing of a cousin in a freak accident as well as the birth of a new cousin. The third letter was from the government informing them Gustav's father had died in the concentration camp two years prior.

Gustav was devastated. While he never knew him, he secretly hoped one day his father would walk in the door. He would announce he had an important job so they needn't worry about where money was coming from, and they could buy frivolous things like toys or movies or even go on a summer holiday to Friesland and have ice cream.

His sisters told him he was now the man of the house in his father's absence. To toughen him up, they enrolled him in the local boxing gym so he could defend himself and have the company of older men for the wisdom they could bring to his life.

After a while, he adjusted to the special aroma of the gym and became unaware of it but his sisters were always reminded of their decision when he opened the door on his return and the special cologne of sweat, liniment, testosterone and bleach came in with him.

Some of the older boys at the gym told him about the collaborator next door.

Apparently, while all the other local men and youths had been drafted into slave labour by the Germans, he had been employed by the Waffen SS to drive generals in their off-duty hours in a non-military vehicle as they cavorted with local prostitutes and dined with collaborating Dutch officials.

While his father was stolen from him by the Germans, the father next door was working for them.

He hardened against the world and grew increasingly resentful of the family next door, he found his calling in the boxing gym and was uplifted by the praise of the older men who not only taught him how to box but also some of the joys he might look forward to with girls who weren't his sisters as well as the special steel needed to knock someone down quickly and prevent him getting up again even if it wasn't always according to the rules of that soft cock the Marquess of Queensberry.

Then one day as he administered punishment to a punching bag while telling it why he was hitting him, the older man holding it stopped him in his tracks telling him a little-known fact.

The Kid's father had been living a double life while driving for the Germans. By keeping his eyes on the road and not letting his passengers know he spoke excellent German, he fed the information he overheard from the drunks in the back seat directly to the Dutch resistance which resulted in more than one official meeting an untimely death and more than one German advance being thwarted.

He told Gustav that, far from being a collaborating traitor, the father had undertaken work that would have resulted in execution on the spot if the Germans found out.

That shone a whole new light on the family next door, so he decided to take The Kid under his wing and into his gang.

Gustav's role in the gang was to ensure the younger kids weren't bullied or harassed by kids from other gangs. He was known to never lose a fight should one happen no matter the size or age of his opponent.

In the never-ending economic aftermath of the war, what little fun they could enjoy had to be generated with no cost doing what they invented for themselves.

Football matches on abandoned German airfields. Races to the top of bombed out buildings. The discovery that chimneys which had survived bombing and fires could be toppled by the combined efforts of the gang rocking them.

They called this game “Fucking up Zwarte Piet” the companion of St Nicholas’ who listened at the chimneys of homes to hear whether the children inside had behaved well enough to receive a nice present.

Their last effort was their biggest yet and the chimney so tall it developed a flick like the end of a whip sending the pot at the very top backwards as the bulk of the chimney fell forwards.

Gustav watched the chimney pot as it fell towards the ground. It didn’t fall like the aerodynamic bomb that had levelled the building. Instead, it tumbled.

As he watched where it would land, he saw The Kid was standing in exactly that patch of rubble made up of broken bricks, lumps of concrete, spears of reinforcing steel and the ubiquitous layer of constantly shifting dust.

He let out a wail trying to tell The Kid to get out of the way.

Their eyes met. Gustav’s full of panic and dread. The Kid’s full of pride in being the centre of Gustav’s attention then confusion.

The pot hit The Kid killing him instantly.

As leader of the gang responsible for helping the younger kids navigate a tough and cruel world, he felt gutted and suddenly very tired and vulnerable.

He would go on to become an important politician in later years but, for now, he just wanted a father to tell him everything would be alright.