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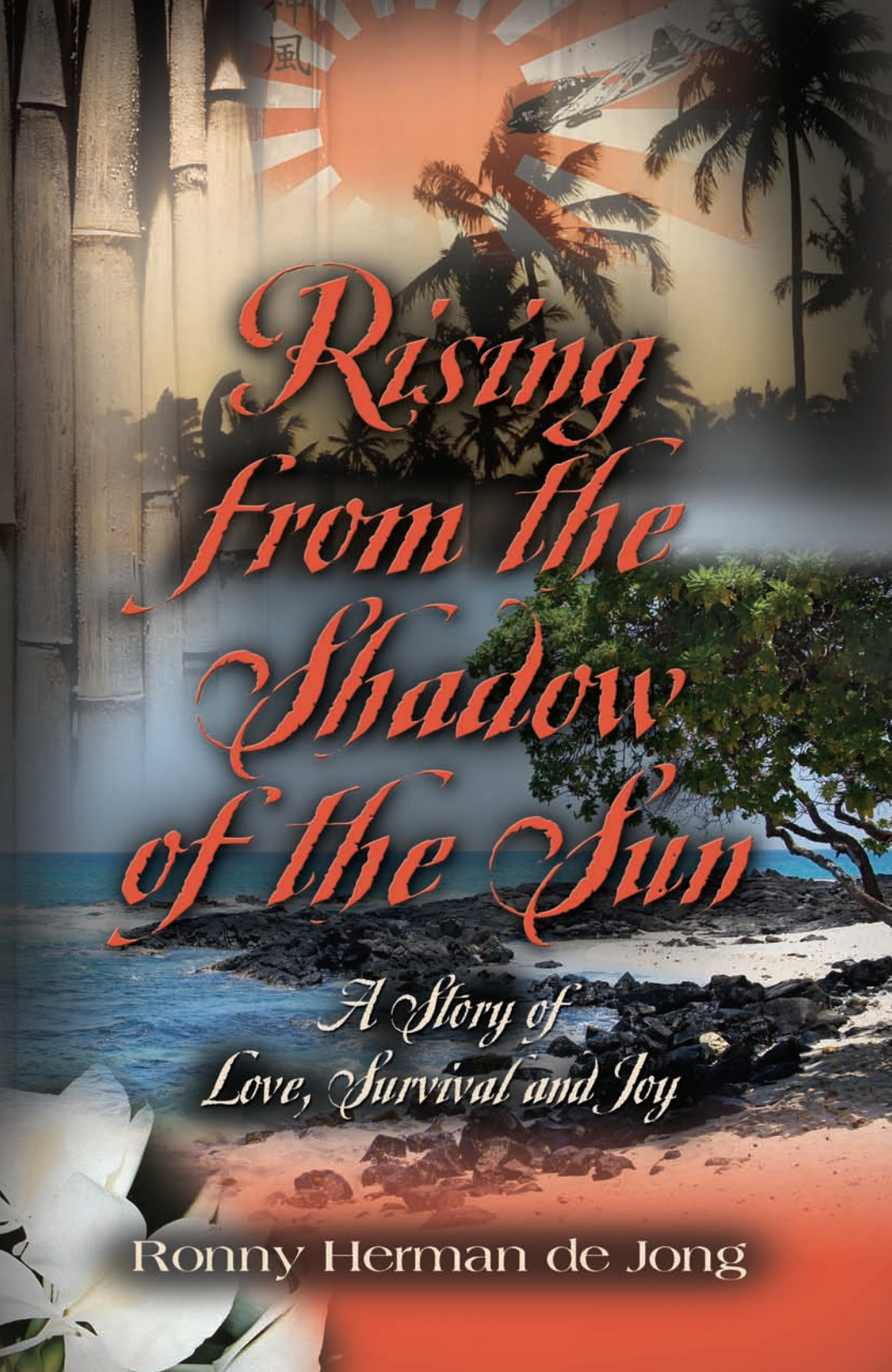
Rising from the Shadow of the Sun, A Story of Love, Survival and Joy


Rising from the Shadow of the Sun
A Story of Love, Survival and Joy
Ronny Herman de Jong

ISBN 978-1-60910-753-6

Printed in the United States of America.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2011

First Edition

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Eluding Death

Sticking his bayonet through the *gedèk* (bamboo fence), the Japanese soldier aimed to kill me. He missed. A little girl with blond braids, I was only five years old in March of 1944. The bayonet sliced through the air over my head. "Mamma!" I cried.

"Ronny, come here!" cried Mamma.

Dropping my flowers I scrambled across the *slokan* (ditch) and into Mamma's arms. "Oh Ron!" said Mamma. "I am so glad you could run so fast through the *slokan*! You're such a big girl!"

"What was that, Mamma?"

"You probably came too close to the *gedèk*. On the other side is a soldier. He thought you were running away and put a stick through the *gedèk* to scare you."

"Can you get my flowers, Mam? They are for you."

Mamma took my hand. "We will get them later, when the soldier is gone. All right?"

That morning, Mamma and I were walking along the edge of the camp. I was picking wildflowers for Mamma across the *slokan*. On the other side of the *gedèk*, a Japanese guard heard voices and intended to kill me. It is one of the bad memories I have of those three and a half years in Japanese concentration camps. At that time, Mamma, my little sister Paula and I were incarcerated in Halmahera, a Japanese concentration camp outside of Semarang, on the island of Java in the Dutch East Indies. The war had gone on for two years.

The Japanese Army had conquered our island in March of 1942. Civilians—men, women and children—were put into concentration camps. Our captors withheld food and medication and treated the prisoners in the most inhumane way. Many were tortured and raped and beheaded. The Imperial Japanese Army's instructions were to exterminate the Western Race in

the islands at all costs so Japan could achieve a monopoly in Southeast Asia.

It was a near miss. I did not die at the hands of that Japanese soldier in 1944 because I was too small. I could have died a year later from hunger edema. In August of 1945, I was six. My legs were like sticks, my tummy was bloated and my cheeks were puffy. I was in the last stages of *beri-beri*, hunger edema. Paula, then four years old, had dry edema and was a mere skeleton. She could not walk or sit anymore. I imagined how it would happen. Paula would die first. Mamma had "wet" edema, like me, and she would die soon after Paula. I would have a month, perhaps two, before it was my turn. The Japanese would throw me into a mass grave outside the camp; a large hole in the ground dug especially for this purpose. When the war was over, allied rescue troops would unearth my body with all the others and bury it properly in the cemetery outside of town. They would top my grave with a nameless white cross. They put white crosses on thousands of graves in memory of the women and children who perished under the cruel treatment of the Japanese.

Forty-nine years later, I stood at that cemetery and wept. I wept tears of sorrow for all those mothers and children who had perished, and I wept tears of joy because I was alive.

I did not die in 1945 from hunger edema, because on August 15, 1945, the Japanese Empire abruptly surrendered and the war was over. With perseverance, great love for her little girls, faith in God, trust in the ultimate victory of the Allied Forces, and hope to be reunited with Fokko, our Pappa, Mamma kept the three of us alive for almost four years. During our time in captivity, she wrote letters to her parents in the Netherlands, which was occupied by Germany, in a thick, black diary. Initially she wrote how we little ones grew up, then how Fokko, our Pappa, had to leave when the Japanese army invaded our

island, and then about all the things that happened to us during those grueling years under Japanese occupation. When the war was over in Europe as well as in Asia, we returned to the Netherlands for a six-month furlough and she gave the letter diary to her parents in Middelburg.

The world knows a lot about the war in Europe, the German occupation and the Holocaust. This book captures an aspect of WWII that is unknown to many: the torture and deaths that took place in civilian concentration camps all over Asia under Japanese occupation.

Following are the experiences of my family during the war in the Pacific. Thanks to my mother's love and courage I was given a second chance on life. To understand the full scope of the effects of the murderous invasion and four years of captivity on the lives of civilians it is important to begin with a description of their lives in the tropics some seventy years ago.

Life on a Roller Coaster

The bulging skin popped open amidst the smooth feathers. Pappa held the white-and-gray dove upside down so I had access to the opening I had just slit with the scalpel. I scooped a spoonful of undigested slimy seeds out of her gizzard, then another one. Interestingly, there was no blood. It didn't seem to hurt either. Neither one of us could detect a cause for the blockage she seemed to have developed in her digestive tract. After some deliberation, Pappa handed me the large curved needle already threaded with cotton yarn. It was about four inches long. I had to tug hard to get it through the dove's skin back and forth across the gap. *Poor dove*, I thought. I closed the wound and Pappa put the dove inside the pigeon-house, where she would stay for a few days so we could keep an eye on her.

On a Saturday afternoon, just after the sun dropped behind the roof and shaded the back yard, we walked to the chicken coop together. Two of our Australorps had developed some strange growths around their beaks and nostrils. Although Pappa didn't know whether they were malignant, he knew they were contagious, so we had to treat them. A brief chase resulted in a good catch and I sat down on the upside-down feed bucket with one of the affected black beauties in a firm grip turned over on my lap. Her dark legs kicked wildly in the air in protest as Pappa wound a piece of rope around them. Dabbing iodine on the growths on her red face made her screech with pain. *Poor chick*, I thought. It was a quick job, and she ran off in a flurry when we set her free.

From the time I was twelve and still lived in Soerabaja, Pappa involved me in all kinds of medical hands-on tasks. He trained me to become a doctor.

I wanted to be an actress. From the time I was a little girl and we lived in Soerabaja after the war, I performed puppet

shows for the children in the neighborhood. In high school I won leading roles in several plays. I wanted to go to acting school. "Acting school?" said Pappa. "Nonsense. As an actress you will have a very uncertain future. You will not have a happy marriage." He was adamant.

I adapted. I lived according to my parents' expectations. My high school education prepared me for Medical School, focusing on math, science and biology. At the end of the second furlough in Holland in 1956, my parents returned to Surabaja with Paula. I stayed behind in The Hague to continue my education. It was not until I graduated high school that I thought about my future as a doctor. The idea all of a sudden terrified me. I didn't want to be a doctor. Acting School was still out of the question. A vocational guidance test showed I would be a good teacher or social worker. "What?" said Pappa. "A teacher or a social worker? Nonsense. They need teachers and social workers, but *you* will be a doctor, and a good one Ronny. Trust me."

But ultimately, the choice was mine. Since I knew next to nothing about the profession of a social worker, I decided to go to college, major in English and take it from there. A Math student, I had no education whatsoever in the ancient languages, Greek and Latin, a prerequisite for Language studies. Undaunted, I took evening classes in Greek and Latin and a secretarial course during the daytime. I also learned to make patterns and sew. After my high school graduation, Pappa gave me an old electric sewing machine he had found in Chinatown in Soerabaja. He had personally sanded all of its 12 x 8 x 12 inches and painted it a soft yellow. It must have been one of the very first electric sewing machines ever, so it needed a transformer. It could only sew forward but it had a light. I worked wonders on that little machine for many years. I still have it.

"Do you want to dance?" The voice belonged to a curly-haired, blue-eyed young man who reached out his hand. After the performance in Amicitia, The Hague, the chairs had been removed and Dixieland music filled the auditorium. We danced and talked all night and I fell head over heels in love. Meindert de Jong happened to live about five blocks from where I lived and he took me home on the back of his bike after the party. It was five in the morning and we were still kissing goodbye outside my front door when the milkman put two bottles of milk on the porch with a sideways glance at us. We parted reluctantly. After college, Meindert had lived in The Hague for just six months, and was drafted a month after we met, starting boot camp in Amsterdam in April 1957. "I want to see you again," he said and left me his radio so he had a reason to come back. We stayed in touch through letters and phone calls, and got engaged in February of 1960.

Figure 30 – Engagement in 1960

"Ronny Herman, Number One." I stood up from the attic floor where two hundred and six freshman students were hunkering down. It was our first roll call of the three-week rush of the sorority V.V.S.L., the *Vereniging van Vrouwelijke Studenten in Leiden* (Organization of Female Students in Leyden), and nobody else volunteered to be first. In 1957, after one year of Greek and Latin studies in The Hague, I started my college education at Leyden University, the oldest University in the Netherlands. Twice a week, at night, I rode my bike from Leyden to The Hague, some fifteen miles each way, for additional Greek and Latin classes. In Leyden, I went through three weeks of initiation. Her Royal Highness, Princess Beatrix Van Oranje Nassau, had enrolled at the university one year before me and was one of the five women serving on the initiation committee. The daughter of Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, she was heiress to the throne. It was very special to be so close to royalty. We took different classes, of course, but we ran into each other at times on the street or at our sorority Clubhouse.

After I passed my State Exams for Latin and Greek in the summer of 1958, I could finally fully engage in college life. I spent a summer as *au pair* with a wonderful family with four children in England to improve my conversational English, and traveled with them to the South of France. Meanwhile, Meindert had left the army as a 1st lieutenant and worked in Amsterdam in the buying department of Holland's most famous department store, The Bijenkorf. He applied for and was accepted in a business exchange program through The Netherlands America Foundation with offices in Amsterdam and New York. Scheduled to leave on January 13, 1961, he would be gone for a year to a year and a half.

In the train on our way to our parents' home for Christmas, we realized the full extent of the situation. "Eighteen months without you will seem like an eternity," I said.

"They only recruit single people. But if we get married, I could just tell them I *had* to bring my wife along since we got married over Christmas."

"You're leaving in three weeks! I need a passport and a ticket, and I'll have to move out of my apartment. Tomorrow it's Christmas. When can we possibly get married?"

"You can store your things in your parents' basement, get your papers and come by boat as soon as you have everything arranged. We'll get married before I leave."

"Really?"

"Of course, Ron! Let's do it!"

Anything was possible. We were jubilant at the prospect of going to the United States together. We knew we could overcome every hurdle. We were in love. Life couldn't be better.

Our parents, when we informed them of our decision, were shocked to say the least. "You need to build a future before you can get married," Meindert´s father said with a frown.

"You don't have to do *everything* together," his mother said to me. "Meindert will be back in a year and you can get married then." But with the exuberant confidence of youth, we told them we did not want to compromise. We would get married *now*. We had ten days to make it work. We jumped on a roller coaster.

On Tuesday, December 27, we borrowed his father's car and drove to the south of Holland to get Meindert's birth certificate in the village where he was born. On the 28th, just in time, we posted the announcement of our intended marriage, which had to be posted at least ten working days before the actual wedding, on the bulletin board in City Hall in Nijmegen,

my parents' domicile. We found a minister and a charming little ivy-clad church in Beek, a nearby village. I bought yards of white lace and satin, from which Mamma and I, in a week's time, fabricated a lovely wedding dress and a veil. To get white shoes in January in the Netherlands initially posed a problem, but I did find a pair my size in the basement of a shoe store in Arnhem. They had been in the window all summer, so they had lost their purest white sheen, but they would have to do. We sent out invitations, asked four of our friends to be our witnesses and Meindert's two younger sisters to be our flower girls. Our wedding took place on January 10, 1961 at City Hall in Nijmegen, and was blessed right afterwards at the little church in Beek. A lovely reception at a restaurant overlooking the Waal River completed the day. We thanked our parents for all of their efforts and cooperation in spite of their disillusionment at our "irresponsible, wily whim." Our day was perfect. We were free. Life couldn't be better.

Figure 31 – Church in Beek

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