GOD'S SMUGGLER

BROTHER ANDREW

WITH JOHN AND ELIZABETH SHERRILL

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Prologue

The Smuggler in Our Living Room

The slender, thirty-something fellow was sitting in our living room as we peppered him with questions for the book we were writing, when our eight-year-old daughter, Liz, burst through the front door from the school bus. It was a crucial moment in the interviews—the episode of meeting Petroff in Sofia—but whenever Liz or one of her brothers came home, that took priority with the man known as "Brother Andrew."

"Liz!" he cried out as he did every afternoon when she returned from school. "How did the spelling class go?"

Roaring with laughter at his own question, Andrew insisted on stopping the book session for his daily walk with his young friend. To this Dutchman, *spelling* as a school subject was a never-failing source of amusement. If you can speak Dutch, he explained to the kids, you can spell it; words are written just as they sound. Why English spelling should be so difficult seemed to him a strange perversity.

Liz agreed with him heartily on this—and on everything else. All three of our kids were crazy about him, and Andrew, missing his own children, spent every minute he could with them.

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At the end of their walk, Andrew returned to the interrupted interview—reluctantly, it seemed to us. He had always been puzzled by our interest in a book project.

"I can't imagine why you'd want to write about me," he had said when we first proposed it. "Who would be interested? I'm the son of a village blacksmith, never even graduated from high school. I'm just an ordinary person."

That, of course, was exactly the appeal of his story. How, indeed, had God been able to use a fellow with a bad back, a limited education, no sponsorship and no funds, to do things that well-connected, well-endowed people said were impossible? For us and other ordinary people, that was what made Brother Andrew's adventures so intriguing.

It is hard to believe that 35 years have passed since the interviews were completed and *God's Smuggler* was published. Harder still to believe that more than ten million copies, in 35 languages, are in print today.

"And that's not the whole picture," Andrew told us on a visit to our home in the spring of 2001. "Hundreds of thousands of copies have been printed unofficially by Christians in poor countries all over the world, then given away to encourage others." Andrew glanced at us a bit guiltily. "I'm afraid I gave the permissions for them to do this. Was I acting illegally?"

Yes, but we were glad he had done it. And we think God was glad, too.

John and Elizabeth Sherrill

Chappaqua, New York, 2004

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Smoke and Bread Crusts

From the time I first put on wooden shoes—*klompen* we call them in Holland—I dreamed of derring-do. I was a spy behind the lines, I was a lone scout in enemy territory, I crept beneath barbed wire while tracer bullets scorched the air about me.

Of course we didn't have any real enemies in my hometown of Witte—not when I was very small—so we made enemies out of each other. We kids used our *klompen* to fight with; any boy who got himself hit with a wooden shoe just hadn't reached his own fast enough. I remember the day I broke a shoe over my enemy-friend Kees's head. What horrified us both wasn't the enormous bump on his forehead but the ruined shoe. Kees and I forgot our war long enough to try repairing it. But this is a skill gained only with time, and that night my hard-working blacksmith father had to turn cobbler as well. Already that day Papa had got up at five to water and weed the garden that helped to feed his six children. Then he had pedaled four miles on his bicycle to his smithing job in Alkmaar. And now he had to spend the evening gouging a little trough across the top of the wooden shoe,

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pulling a wire through the trough, nailing the wire down on both sides, and repeating the process at the heel so that I could have some shoes to wear to school.

"Andrew, you must be more careful!" said my father in his loud voice. Papa was deaf and shouted rather than spoke. I understood him perfectly: He didn't mean careful of bones and blood, but of hard-earned possessions.

There was one family in particular that acted as the enemy in many of my boyish fantasies. This was the Family Whetstra.

Why I should have picked on the Whetstras I do not know, except that they were the first in our village to begin talking about war with Germany—and this was not a popular subject in Witte. Also they were strongly evangelical Christians. Their God-bless-you's and Lord-willing's seemed sickeningly tame to a secret agent of my stature. So in my mind they were the enemy.

I remember once passing Mrs. Whetstra's kitchen window just as she was putting cookies into the oven of her woodburning stove. Leaning against the front of the house was a new pane of window glass, and it gave me an idea. Here would be my chance to see if the ever-smiling Whetstras could get as mad as other Dutchmen. I picked up the piece of glass and moved ever so stealthily through the lines to the back of enemy headquarters. The Whetstras, like everyone in the village, had a ladder leading to their thatched roof. Off came my *klompen,* and up I went. Silently I placed the pane of glass on the chimney. Then I crept back down the ladder and across the street to post myself out of sight behind a fish-peddler's cart.

Sure enough the smoke backed down the chimney. It filled the kitchen and began to curl out the open window. Mrs. Whetstra ran into her kitchen with a scream, jerked open the oven door and fanned the smoke with her apron. Mr. Whetstra raced outside and looked up at his chimney. If I had expected a stream of rich Dutch prose I was disappointed, but the expression on his face as he climbed the ladder was entirely of-this-earth, and I chalked up for myself a tremendous victory against overwhelming odds.

Another favorite enemy was my older brother Ben. Typical of older brothers, Ben was a master swapper. His corner of our common loft-bedroom above the main floor of our house was splendid

with things that had once belonged to me or the other children; somehow we could never recall what we had received in exchange. His chief treasure was a piggy bank that had once been our sister Maartje's. In it Ben kept the pennies that he earned doing errands for the burgomaster or tending garden for Miss Meekle, our schoolmistress. Events in Germany were now in the news more than ever, and in my fantasies Ben became an enormously wealthy German munitions maker. One day while he was out earning more pennies, I took his bank down from its shelf, slid a knife into the opening, and turned the pig upside down. After about fifteen minutes of narrow escapes from the brown-shirted guards patrolling his estate, I had collected nearly a guilder from the enemy.

That part was easy. Much harder was the question of what to do with my spoils. A guilder was worth 25 cents—a fortune for a child in our little town. To have arrived in the sweetshop with that much money would certainly have caused questions.

I had it! What if I said I had found it! The next day, at school, I went up to the teacher and held out my hand. "Look what I found, Miss Meekle."

Miss Meekle blew her breath out slowly. "My, Andrew! What a lot of money for a little boy!"

"Can I keep it?"

"You don't know who it belongs to?"

Even under torture, they would never wring the truth from me. "No, ma'am. I found it in the street."

"Then you must take it to the police, Andy. They will tell you what to do."

The police! Here was something I hadn't counted on. That afternoon in fear and trembling I took the money into the very bastion of law and rectitude. If our little town hall had really been Gestapo headquarters, I couldn't have been more terrified. It seemed to me that stolen money must give off a telltale gleam. But apparently my story was believed, because the police chief wrote my name on an envelope, put the money inside, and told me that if no one claimed it within a year, it was mine.

And so, a year later, I made that trip to the sweetshop. Ben had never missed the pennies. That spoiled the game; instead of the flavor

of sabotage behind the lines, the candy had the flat taste of common theft.

As much as anything, I think my dreams of thrilling action, my endless fantasies, were a means of escaping from my mother's radio. Mama was a semi-invalid. A bad heart forced her to spend a large part of each day sitting in a chair, where her consolation was the radio. But she kept the dial at one spot only: the gospel station from Amsterdam. Sometimes it was hymn-singing, sometimes it was preaching; always—to my ears—it was dull.

Not to Mama. Religion was her life. We were poor, even by Witte standards; our house was the smallest in the village. But to our door came an unending stream of beggars, itinerant preachers, gypsies, who knew that they would be welcome at Mama's table. The cheese that night would be sliced thinner, the soup stretched with water, but a guest would never be turned away.

Thriftiness was as important in Mama's religion as hospitality. At four I could peel potatoes without a centimeter's waste. At seven the potatoes passed to my little brother Cornelius while I graduated to the heady responsibility of shining shoes. These were not our everyday *klompen*; these were our leather shoes for Sunday, and it was an economic disaster if a pair failed to last fifteen years. Mama said they must shine so the preacher would have to shade his eyes.

Because Mama could not lift heavy loads, Ben did the laundry each week. The clothes had to be hauled in and out of the tub, but the actual washing was done by pumping a wooden handle that worked a set of paddles. This technological marvel was the pride of the household. We would take turns spelling Ben at the handle, pushing the heavy stick blade back and forth until our arms ached.

The only member of the family who did no work was the oldest child, Bastian. Two years older than Ben and six years older than I, Bas never learned to do any of the things other people did. He spent the day standing under an elm tree on the dike road, watching the village go by. Witte was proud of its elms in this tree-poor country—one for every house, their branches meeting to form a green archway over the road. For some reason, Bas never stood beneath our tree. His post was under the third one down, and there he stood all day long, until one of us led him home for supper.

Next to Mama, I think I loved Bas more than anyone on earth. As the villagers passed his elm tree they would call to him to get his shy and wonderful smile in response. "Ah, Bas!" Over the years he heard this phrase so often that at last he began to repeat it, the only words he ever learned.

But though Bas could not talk or even dress himself, he had a strange and remarkable talent. In our tiny sitting room, as in most Dutch parlors in the 1930s, was a small pump organ. Papa was the only one in the family who could read music, and so in the evenings he would sit on the little bench, pumping the foot pedals and picking out tunes from an ancient hymnbook while the rest of us sang.

All except Bas. The minute the music started, Bas would drop down and crawl beneath the keyboard, where he would crouch out of the way of Papa's feet and press himself to the baseboard of the organ. Of course Papa's playing was rough and full of mistakes, not only because he could not hear the music, but also because the years of wielding a hammer on an anvil had left his fingers thick and stiff. Some nights he seemed to hit almost as many wrong notes as right ones.

To Bas it never mattered. He would press against the vibrating wood with rapture on his face. Where he was, of course, he could not see which keys were played or which knobs Papa pulled. But all at once Bas would stand up and gently push against Papa's shoulder.

"Ah, Bas. Ah, Bas," he would say.

And Papa would get up, and Bas would take his place at the bench. He always fussed a little with the hymnal as he had seen Papa do, turning the pages and usually managing to get the whole book upside down. Then, squinting at the page like Papa, he began to play. From beginning to end he would play the songs Papa had played that night. But not as Papa played them—hesitantly, clumsily, full of discords. Bas played them perfectly, without a mistake, with such surpassing beauty that people would stop in the street outside to listen. On summer nights when our door was open, a little crowd would gather outside the house, many of them with tears streaming down their faces. For when Bas played, it was as though an angel sat at the organ.

The big event in our week, of course, was church. Witte is in the polder land of Holland—land that generations of Dutchmen have reclaimed from the sea—and like all villages in the polders is built

along a dike. It has only one street, the road leading north and south on top of the dike. The houses are virtual islands, each built on its mound of earth and connected to the road with a tiny bridge spanning the drainage canal. And at either end of town, on the highest, most imposing mounds of all, are the two churches.

There is still a lot of feeling in Holland between Catholics and Protestants, a carryover from the days of the Spanish occupation. During the week the village fishmonger will talk pleasantly with the village ironmonger, but on Sundays the fishmonger will walk with his family northward to the Roman church while the ironmonger will walk with his family southward to the Protestant church, and as they pass on the street neither will acknowledge the other with so much as a nod.

Our family was fiercely proud of its Protestant traditions. My father was glad, I think, that our house happened to be in the northern end of town, because this gave him the entire length of the village in which to demonstrate that we were headed in the right direction.

Because of Papa's deafness, we always sat in the very first pew at church. The pew was too short for the entire family to sit together, and I would manage to lag behind, letting Mama and Papa and the other children go in first. Then I would have to walk back toward the rear of the church to "find a seat." The seat I found was usually far beyond the church door. In the winter I skated down the frozen canals on my wooden *klompen*. In the summer I sat so still in the fields that wild crows would sit on my shoulders and peck gently at my ears.

With a kind of instinct, I knew precisely when the church service would be over and would slip into a corner of the church vestibule just as the first sufferers emerged. I stood near the preacher—who never once missed my presence—and listened for the comments of the congregation about his sermon. Thus I picked up his text, his theme, sometimes even the gist of a story.

This ploy was terribly important, because without it I could not have carried off the most important phase of my weekly adventure. It is the custom in Holland to gather in private homes after church. Three ingredients are always present. Coffee, cigar smoke, and a point-by-point discussion of the sermon. The men in our village could afford these long black cigars only once a week. Each Sunday

as their wives brewed strong black coffee, they brought them out and lit up with great ceremony. To this day whenever I catch the smell of coffee and cigar smoke, my heart beats faster; it is an odor associated with fear and excitement: Could I once again fool my parents into thinking that I had been to church?

"It seems to me that the preacher used Luke 3:16 just last month," I would say, knowing full well that he had not, but getting across in this way the fact that I knew the text.

Or: "Wasn't that a good story about politicians?" playing out a scrap of conversation I had overhead. "I should think the burgomaster would be mad."

The technique was immensely successful. I blush to think how seldom I attended church as a child. I blush even more when I remember that my trusting, simple-hearted family never suspected.

By 1939 the whole country saw what the Whetstras had seen all along: The Germans were intent on a pattern of conquest that included Holland. In our house we scarcely thought about it. Bas was sick; the doctor called it tuberculosis. Mama and Papa moved onto a mattress in the sitting room. For months Bas lay in their tiny bedroom, coughing, coughing, his flesh shrinking until only bones and skin lay on the bed. His suffering was more dreadful than that of a normal person, because he could not tell us how he felt.

I remember one day just after my eleventh birthday creeping into the sickroom while Mama was busy in the kitchen. Entering that room was strictly forbidden, for the disease was contagious. But that was what I wanted. If Bas was going to die, then I wanted to die too. I threw myself down on top of him and kissed him again and again on the mouth. In July 1939, Bas died, while I stayed healthy as ever, and I felt that God had betrayed me twice.

Two months later, in September, our government called for a general mobilization. For once, Mama allowed her radio to be used for news. We turned the volume as high as it would go, but still Papa could not hear. So my little sister Geltje stationed herself at the set and shouted salient pieces of information to him.

"All reserve units are activated, Papa."

"All private cars are commandeered."

By nightfall the traffic jam had begun, the endless traffic jam that was to be the characteristic feature of the months before invasion. Every automobile in Holland was on the road. There seemed to be just as many going north as there were going south. No one knew where he was supposed to be, but he was getting there as fast as he could. Day after day, wearing my baggy trousers and loose blouse, I stood under the tree where Bas used to stand and watched. Nobody talked much.

Only Mr. Whetstra seemed to find the courage to put into words what we all knew. I could not understand why I was being drawn toward the Whetstras at this time, but frequently I found myself walking past that kitchen window.

"Good afternoon, Andrew."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Whetstra."

"Out on an errand for your mother? You'd better have a cookie for energy." She picked up a plate of cookies and brought them to the window.

Mr. Whetstra looked up from the kitchen table. "Is that little Andrew? Out to see the mobilization firsthand?"

"Yes, sir." For some reason I put my cookie behind my back.

"Andrew, you must say prayers for your country every night. We are about to go through a very hard time."

"Yes, sir."

"What good can men with popguns do against planes and tanks?"

"Yes, sir."

"They'll be here, Andrew, with their steel helmets and their goose-step and their hate, and all we will have is our prayers." Mr. Whetstra came over to the window and leaned across the sill. "Will you pray, Andrew? Pray for the courage to do all we can, and then having done all, to stand. Will you do that, Andrew?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good boy." Mr. Whetstra drew his head back into the room. "Now get along on your errand."

But as I turned and started down the street, Mr. Whetstra called after me. "You can eat the cookie. Oh, I know, sometimes that old stove of ours smokes something awful. But it's worked fine ever since I got my new window in."

That night, lying on my bed in the loft, I got to thinking about Mr. Whetstra. So he'd known all along. But he hadn't told my father, as every other grown-up in town would have done. I wondered why. I also wondered about his wanting me to pray. What good would that do! God never listened. If the Germans really did come, I planned to do a lot worse to them than pray. I fell asleep dreaming of the feats of daring I would work single-handed against the invader.

By April, Witte was crowded with refugees from the polder land to the east of us. Holland was bombing its own dikes, deliberately flooding land wrested inch by inch from the sea over the centuries, to slow down the German army. Every house except ours, which was too small, held a homeless family from the flooded land, and Mama's soup pot simmered night and day.

But of course the Germans did not come by land. The first planes flew over Witte the night of May 10, 1940. We spent the night in the sitting room, huddled together, not sleeping. All the next day we saw planes and heard the explosions as they bombed the small military airfield four kilometers away. It was my twelfth birthday, but neither I nor anyone else remembered.

Then the Germans bombed Rotterdam. The radio announcer from Hilversum, to whom we had listened since mobilization, wept as he read the release. Rotterdam was gone. In one hour a city had disappeared from the earth. This was the blitzkrieg, the new warfare. The next day Holland surrendered.

A few days later a fat little German lieutenant arrived in Witte in a squad car and set himself up in the burgomaster's house. The handful of soldiers who accompanied him were mostly older men; Witte was not important enough to rate crack troops.

And for a while I really did act out my fantasies of resistance. Many was the night I crept barefoot down the ladder from the loft as two o'clock struck on the town clock. I knew that my mother heard me, because the regular rhythm of her breathing halted as I passed their room. But she never stopped me. Nor did she ask the next morning

what had happened to our precious highly rationed sugar. Everyone in the village was amused when the lieutenant's staff car began to give him trouble. His sparks were fouled. His engine stalled. Some said there was sugar in the lieutenant's gas tank; others thought it was unlikely.

Food ran out in the towns before it did in farming villages like ours, and this fact too I used in my child's war against the enemy. One hot day that first summer, I loaded a basket with cabbages and tomatoes and walked the four miles to Alkmaar. A store there still had a supply of prewar fireworks, and I knew the proprietor wanted vegetables.

I pressed my advantage as far as I could and filled my basket with the firecrackers, placing over them the flowers I had brought along for the purpose. The proprietor stood looking at me in silence. Then, with sudden resolution, he reached under the counter and brought up a large cherry bomb.

"I have no more food."

"You'd better get home before the curfew."

That night back in Witte the floorboards of the loft creaked again, and again Mama held her breath. I slipped out, barefoot, into the night. A patrol of four foot soldiers was moving northward up the street toward our house, playing their torches on each of the buildings as they passed. I moved out of the doorway and flattened myself against the side of the house as the marching boots drew closer. The minute the soldiers had passed I sped across the little bridge between our house and the dike road and ran south to the burgomaster's house. It would have been a simple matter to fire the mammoth cherry bomb in the lieutenant's doorway while the patrol was at the other end of the village. But I wanted more adventure than that. I was the fastest runner in the village, and I thought it would be fun to have these old men in their heavy boots run after me. I don't suppose any of them was over fifty, but to my young eyes they seemed ancient.

So I waited until the patrol began its tour back down the street. Just before they got to headquarters, I lit the fuse and ran.

"*Halt!*" A torchbeam picked me up, and I heard a rifle bolt being drawn. I hadn't counted on guns! I zigged and zagged as I ran up the street. Then the cherry bomb exploded, and for a fraction of a moment the soldier's attention was diverted. I darted across the first bridge I

could find, raced through a garden, and flung myself down among the cabbage heads. For nearly an hour they hunted for me, shouting gruff syllables to one another in German, until at last they gave up.

Elated by this success, I began discharging volleys in broad daylight. One day I stepped from hiding straight into the arms of a soldier. To run was to admit guilt. Yet in my hands was strong circumstantial evidence: In my left hand were firecrackers, in my right, matches.

"Du! Komm mal her!"

My hands clenched around the firecrackers. I did not dare stuff them in my coat pocket; that would surely be the first place he would look.

"Hast du einen Fuerwerkskoerper explodiert?"

"*Fuerwerks?* Oh no, sir!"

I grabbed the two edges of my coat with my clenched hands and held it wide for him to search. The soldier went over me from my wide trousers to my cap. When he turned away in disgust, the firecrackers in my hand were drenched with perspiration.

But as the occupation dragged on, even I tired of my games. In villages near ours hostages were being lined up and shot and houses burned to the ground, as the real resistance hardened and took shape. Jokes against the Germans ceased to be funny.

All over Holland were the *onderduikers* (literally the under-divers), men and boys in hiding to escape deportation to the forced labor camps in Germany. Ben, sixteen when the war began, dived under a farm near Ermelo the first month, and for five years we had no news of him.

Possession of a radio was made a crime against the new regime. We hid Mama's instrument in a crawl space under the sloping roof, and one by one we would crouch there to listen for the Dutch language broadcasts from England. Later, when the Dutch railroad struck, we would even squeeze railroad workers into that tiny hole, and of course there were always Jews to be hidden for a night on their way to the coast.

As the Germans grew desperate for manpower, Witte's tiny occupation force was withdrawn. Then came the dreaded *razzia*. Trucks

would suddenly speed into the villages, at any hour of the day or night, sealing the dike roads at both ends, while squads of soldiers searched every house for able-bodied men. Before I was fourteen I was joining the flight of men and boys into the polders at the first sign of a German uniform. We would run across the fields, crouching low, leaping the canals, making for the swamp beyond the railroad. The railway dike was too high to climb—we would surely be seen—so we would dive into the broad canal that flowed beneath the railroad bridge, to crawl out soaked—panting and shivering. By the end of the war even little Cornelius and Papa, deaf as he was, were joining the race to the swamp.

Between the *razzias,* life was a somber struggle for mere existence. All electricity was reserved for the Germans. With nothing to power the pumps, the rainwater lay deep and stagnant over the polders. In our homes we used oil lamps, making the oil ourselves from cabbage seeds. There was no coal, so Witte cut down its elms. The tree under which Bas had stood was cut the second winter.

But the chief enemy, worse even than the cold and the soldiers, was hunger. We were constantly, naggingly, endlessly hungry. All crops were commandeered for the front as soon as they were picked. My father tended his garden as carefully as ever, but it was the Germans who reaped most of the harvest. For years our family of six lived on rations for two.

At first we were able to add to this allowance by digging the tulip bulbs from our garden and eating them like potatoes. Then even the tulips ran out. Mama would pretend to eat, but many nights I saw her divide her tiny portion among the other plates. Her only consolation was that Bas had not lived to see this time. He never could have understood the ache in his stomach, the dark fireplace, the treeless street.

At last the day came when Mama could not get out of bed. If liberation did not come soon, we knew she would die.

And then in the spring of 1945 the Germans left and the Canadians took their place. People stood in the street weeping for joy. But I was not with them. I was running every step of the five miles to the Canadian encampment, where I was able to beg a small sackful of breadcrusts.

Bread! Quite literally the bread of life!

I brought it home to my family with shouts of "Food! Food! Food!" As Mama gnawed the dry crusts, tears of gratefulness to God rolled down the deep lines in her cheeks.

The war was over.