



De Zwaan – Wikimedia Commons

De Zwaan Links Two Hollands and Two Cultures

By Kathy Warnes



Tulips growing in front of De Zwaan in Holland, Michigan

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Fiction:

Hiding from the Nazis in De Zwaan



Joseph's running feet hit the hard cobblestones that covered Beekman Street. The Nazi soldiers behind him shouted "Halte" in German, but Joseph didn't stop. Fear and determination made his feet move so fast that now he couldn't even feel the cobblestones. He dodged up and down the narrow alleyways and soon the shouts of the soldiers faded into the distance.

As he leaned against a brick wall, panting Joseph felt inside his coat. Yes, the package of bread and cheese for Otto was still there. He felt his heart racing like the engine of one of the trucks that the Nazis had used to take away Otto's parents.

The Nazis had invaded Holland in 1940, and now they were rounding up Jewish people to send away to what Papa had called work camps. They had already sent Otto's parents to a camp and now they wanted to capture Otto and send him away too.

Joseph made himself take slow, steady, breaths until he felt the oiled paper covering the sandwiches instead of his heart. He had lost the soldiers, at least for now, but he had to get to De Zwaan, the windmill that everyone called

The Swan, and warn Otto and Karena. Silently he slid through the dark streets. Pin pricks of lantern light danced behind curtained windows like fireflies, but Joseph knew that if he knocked on any doors and the people inside the houses befriended him, the Nazis would take the people away to prison.

He crept through the dark sea of houses, shops, and church steeples until he reached the mill pond. De Swann stood like a sentinel on its southern bank of the pond, its arms reaching out to him. Joseph knew that De Zwaan would shelter him and his friends. The windmill had stood like a sentinel in Vinkel since the 1880s, before Hitler or the Nazis had come to power. He hurried to melt into its protective shadow and as he slipped into the side door he heard the clatter of Nazi jackboots on cobblestones and their shouts to each other. They had followed him!

Swiftly Joseph ran up De Zwaan's narrow wooden stairs to the fourth floor grinding room where he had left Otto and Karena. Tiny particles of grain from the grindstones floated in the air. He hurried across the wooden floor to the cubby hole in the corner of the room where burlap bags to hold grain were piled.

Where were Karena and Otto? He had to find them and warn them that the Nazis had followed him.

Suddenly, one of the burlap sacks sneezed.



“Karena, it’s me,” Joseph said. He couldn’t help smiling. Karena always sneezed nonstop whenever a bit of dust swirled in the air. Karena was twelve, a year younger than him, and even though she was a girl, she was his best friend. She was the only one of his friends who dared to dodge through the dark streets of Vinkel dodging pursuing Nazis and hiding fugitive Jews in the windmill called De Zwaan .

Karena stood up, a burlap bag clinging to her legs. Another bag was caught in her long black hair. Karena sneezed once, twice, four, and then five times.”

“Gesundheit!” one of the other burlap bags said.

“Hurry up and finish sneezing!” Joseph told Karen. “We have to hide.”

He pulled off two of the top bags and whispered, “Otto, it’s me. I’m back.”

A small voice came from the pile of sacks. “How do I know it’s you? Who are you?”



“It’s Joseph, your friend Joseph Van Dam. Quick! We have to hide! The Nazis followed me here!”

“I’m already hiding,” Joseph.

“This will be the first place the Nazis will look.” Karena jumped out from under another pile of sacks. “We need to find another hiding place.”

“Now!” Joseph said. I hear them downstairs by the door.”

Otto whispered frantically. “Where can we hide?”

Karena pointed to the ceiling. “Up there,” she said.

Joseph’s eyes followed Karena’s pointing finger. He stared at the forest of giant beams that held the De Zwaan’s roof in place. “I see what you mean,” he said. “Quick, let’s climb!”

Karena pulled Otto free from the pile of burlap sacks. She steered him over to the walls which were mostly exposed two by fours. “See, there are little toe holds here and here,” she said.

Joseph hurried over to help Otto climb the toe holds and soon he sat astride one of the beams. The darkness under the eaves blotted out his shape and Joseph had to strain his eyes to see Otto.

“Stretch out flat!” Karena ordered Otto.

Joseph watched Otto’s shadowy figure flicker and waver and when he had stretched out flat on the beam, his body became part of it. Now Joseph could hear the harsh voices of the Nazi soldiers downstairs and the clump of their heavy boots on the stairs. He grabbed Karena’s arm and pushed her toward the toeholds in the wall.

Karena shinnied up the wall like one of the monkey’s she had seen in Artis- the Amsterdam Zoo- climb a tree. Joseph followed close behind her. He scrunched down as flat as he could across the wooden beam. He felt a wooden splinter work its way into his leg, but he didn’t even squirm or yell because the soldiers were right below them now. He could hear them talking to each other in German. “Juden!” one of them shouted. “Juden! Jew!”

“Be quiet, Oscar,” Joseph silently urged him. “Don’t even breathe.”

Oscar kept quiet and didn’t breathe and so did Karena and Joseph. They clung to the beams like Artis monkeys while the soldiers searched the room below for them. Joseph watched one of the soldiers kick the pile of burlap bags with the toe of his boot and another come over and jump up and down on top of them.

Other soldiers fired into the cubbyholes with their guns. Joseph heard Oscar gasp and he hissed, “Be quiet.” Fortunately, the sound of the gunshots covered the noise they made.

Joseph hoped that the soldiers would soon get tired of searching for Oscar and go away, but they kept poking and prodding into all of the dark corners of the room. Several of them even picked up one of the millstones and looked underneath it. Nothing! Now maybe they would leave.

The soldiers didn’t leave. Instead, they sat on the burlap sacks and pulled bread and cheese out of their knapsacks and washed it down with long drinks from their canteens. Joseph felt the sandwiches inside his jacket squish up against the wooden beam. His mouth felt dry and parched.

After they ate and drank, the soldiers continued to search the grinding room. Joseph felt cramps in his legs, but he couldn’t move them, because moving would attract the attention of the soldiers. Joseph could feel Oscar squirming and he sent him a silent message. “Be still, Oscar! Our lives depend on you!”

Oscar stopped squirming, but then Karena started squirming. Joseph wanted to shout at her, “Stop, Karena, don’t sneeze!,” but he knew it wouldn’t do any good. Karena sneezed through everything, even Nazis searching for them.

Desperately Joseph looked around for something to make enough noise to cover Karen’s sneezing. He saw a medium sized rock wedged in the corner of the roof where two beams came together. Slowly he inched his way toward the rock, expecting to hear the soldiers firing at him any minute. When they didn’t, he moved more quickly. He could hear Karena trying to smother her sneeze. “AHHH! AHHH!” Karena said.

Joseph’s fingers closed over the rock just as Karena burst out with “AHHHCHOOO!” He threw the rock through the beams as hard as he could. It had to make lots of noise.

The rock sounded like a thunderstorm, one that boomed loudly enough to cover up Karena’s “AHHHCHOOO!” The Nazi soldiers provided more thunder by shooting at the rock and lightening by shining their flashlights at the rafters. Joseph huddled in his corner where the rafters came together and

he made himself as small as he could. The flashlight beams circled his hiding place, but they didn't light up the dark corner where he was hidden. Joseph held his breath.

One of the Nazi soldiers picked up the rock and held it out in his hand. He said something in German to the soldiers gathered around him and they all laughed. Then one of the soldiers shouted an order at the rest of them and they all crowded around the wooden stairs and started back down to the ground level of De Zwaan.

Joseph listened to their fading footsteps and slowly let out his breath. He stayed huddled in the corner for another ten minutes to be certain the Nazi soldiers were really gone. Then he slowly inched his way across the beam to Karena.

"Do you have to sneeze again?" he whispered.

"Not right now," Karena said. "But let's hurry and get home before another sneeze grows."

Joseph and Karena wriggled over to the beam where Otto still lay stretched out full length.

"You two look like snails," Otto told them.

"We have to move quicker than snails," Joseph said. "We need to take Otto to the next safe house and get home safe ourselves."

Otto slid over to the edge of the rafter beam and climbed down the toeholds in the wall. Joseph and Karena followed him. Otto stood in front of Joseph. The look in Otto's brown eyes reminded Joseph of the way his pet rabbit looked at a cat. "There is no house that is safe," Otto said.

"We will hide you as safely as we can," Joseph told him.

"AACHOO! It's dusty up here," Karena said. She started down the wooden stairs without looking back to see if Joseph and Otto were following her. Joseph followed Otto and Karena down the dark, dusty stairs to entrance of



De Zwaan. Before he got to the bottom of the stairs, Joseph saw a wavery figure in the millpond in front of De Zwaan. He jumped back and pulled Karena and Otto back into the mill.

Otto didn't ask any questions. He rolled over and over across the floor of the mill and hid in the closet. Karena rolled after him. Joseph stayed on guard in the doorway, ready to sound the alarm and to fight if necessary. He didn't take his eyes off of the millpond and the shadowy figure flickering across it. Joseph was sure the figure was a Nazi soldier, waiting to trap them.

An hour crept by and then two hours. The moon sailed across the sky like a schooner on cloudy seas. The bright moonlight illuminated the wavery figure on the mill pond. Instead of a Nazi soldier, the wavery figure turned out to be wavery branches from a large oak tree growing on the bank of the mill pond.



Joseph ducked inside of De Zwaan to get Karena and Otto and the three of them slipped through the dark streets of Vinkel. They stopped in front of a

small brown house. Joseph shook Otto's hand. "Have a safe journey and don't sneeze!" he said.

Karena hugged Otto and then a woman with a shawl covering her face pulled Otto into the house and closed the door behind them.

"I have to sneeze!" Kareena said.



Fact:

De Zwaan – The Swan – Immigrates From Holland To Holland

In the 1960s, the city of Holland, Michigan spent about \$450,000.00 to reassemble and restore the 240 year old De Zwaan windmill, a grain grinding windmill which like many older windmills in Europe, had been damaged during World War II.

The City of Holland also kept two promises to Dutch leaders. One promise said that De Zwaan had to be kept open hours so the general public could learn from it. The City of Holland also promised that De Zwaan would stay open as a working windmill. Diek Medendorp strengthened the friendship chain between Vinkel, Holland, and Holland, Michigan, by tearing down and rebuilding De Zwaan.

In 1964, third generation miller and millwright Jan Diederik “Diek” Medendorp, dismantled the De Zwaan, Dutch for “the swan,” windmill in

Vinkel, a small Dutch town. He placed the blades in the traditional “mourning position” by guiding the blade slightly left of the vertical, rotating counterclockwise.

Dutch Descendants Search for a Dutch Windmill

Diek Medendorp was a living link in the chain of time and tradition connecting the Netherland with Holland, Michigan. The first links were forged in 1847 when Reverend Albertus C. Van Raalte and his flock of 60 Dutch Calvinists crossed the Atlantic Ocean from Rotterdam, Holland, to New York in 47 days, with the goal of buying land in Wisconsin. Bad weather forced the group to stop in Detroit where they heard about land for sale in West Michigan.

On January 1, 1847, Reverend Van Raalte reached the banks of Lake Macatawa and bought land, and the first group of settlers arrived in what was to become Holland, Michigan, on February 9, 1847.

The Dutch immigrants made new lives in their new country, but they didn’t sever ties with their old country and they passed on their traditions to new generations of Hollanders. In 1961, Holland businessman Carter Brown and Holland resident Willard Wichers, who had been United States director of the Netherlands Information Bureau and their colleagues were looking for a symbol of their Dutch roots and a visible link from the Old World Holland to the New World Holland in Michigan.

To their collective way of thinking, a windmill would be a perfect symbol. They investigated and discovered a windmill called De Zwaan, Dutch for “graceful swan,” which had been built in Zaandam near Amsterdam in 1761, or according to other sources in 1776.

Carter Brown and his Holland associates authorized \$450,000 in revenue bonds and they finally received permission to remove DeZawaan, one of the Netherland’s ancient windmills and transport it to Holland, Michigan.

Operation Dutch Windmill

The task of acquiring an authentic Dutch windmill didn’t move along as smoothly as wind filled De Zwaan sails. Willard Wichers and his group made several trips to the Netherlands searching for a windmill. “De

Hollandsche Molen”, a Dutch society that worked to preserve windmills, insisted that no more windmills were available to ship out of the Netherlands. Dutch officials weren’t anxious to sell local windmills to foreign buyers.

The last windmill to leave the Netherlands had been dismantled to be shipped to Aruba, in the Netherlands Antilles for restoration. It was meant to be the last to leave the Netherlands. Dutch officials had to be convinced to sell De Zwaan to the Americans.

Willard Wichers and a group of citizens from Holland, Michigan, negotiated with De Hollandsche Molen and convinced them that an authentic Dutch windmill in Holland, Michigan would strengthen the cultural and historic ties between The Netherlands and the people of Holland, Michigan.

Willard Wichers and Group Choose DeZwaan

During their search for an authentic Dutch windmill, Willard Wichers and his group spied De Zwaan in the Brabant town of Vinkel. DeZwaan had originally been constructed in the Zaan District in the 1700s and relocated in Vinkel in the 1880s. DeZwaan had been heavily damaged during World War II and three local agencies couldn’t agree about what to do with the windmill.

Meanwhile, back in Holland, Michigan, the city had leased approximately 160 acres of land along the Black River near the center of Holland as a site for a park after a group of experts had surveyed the land and recommended it as an ideal windmill location.

The City of Holland eventually reclaimed a 36 acre swamp on the eastern end of Lake Macatawa as Windmill Island. The wind had smooth sailing from Lake Michigan, and the Black River threaded its way through a wooded and rustic landscape. It seemed as if Willard Wichers and his committee had bought the Netherlands landscape to transport to Holland as well as the 240-year-old De Zwaan.

Holland and its citizens managed the transplanted Netherlands landscape from there. Eventually, De Zwaan and the Netherlands style landscape were expanded to include Windmill Island canals, dikes, and a draw bridge. There were Dutch buildings, farm animals, and tulips. In the years to come, tulips bloomed in numbers vast enough to stretch from the Netherlands to Holland, Michigan, and back, if only in the imaginations of tulip lovers.

Diek Medendorp Reconstructs De Zwaan

Workers in the Netherlands dismantled De Zwaan piece by piece and painstakingly packed the windmill into crates and boxes to be shipped to the United States. De Zwaan arrived at the Muskegon, Michigan Harbor on October 6, 1964, aboard the Prins Willem van Oranje. Workers loaded it into a truck and transported it to the site of Windmill Island in Holland.

Diek Medendorp and his wife Nellie arrived on October 10, 1964, and he began working to reconstruct De Zwaan with Jacob Jaap de Blecourt, in charge of designing the flower gardens on Windmill Island, assisting him. Del Schrotenboer whose family had roots in Overijssel, the Netherlands, used his company Del Construction, and a crew of local workers to reassemble the windmill.

Del Schrotenboer recalled watching Diek Medendorp craft windmill parts with traditional hand tools and old country skills that had been passed down to him through generations. Diek Medendorp trained Del's brother, Maynard Schrotenboer to be the first American miller of De Zwaan. Maynard learned how to operate the gears and millstone, and how to set the sails and adjust them for wind conditions. He served for two years as De Zwaan's first American miller, and at the time this was the only job of its kind in the United States.

De Zwaan's Anatomy

De Zwaan measures 125 feet from the bottom of the ten foot mound to the tip of its upright sail, a height equal to a twelve story building. Narrow stairs lead to the mill's five floors. The first two floors are inside the brick base and in normal times are used to store up ground grain. The third level, often called the "meal floor," is used to store ground and bagged grain. The fourth floor holds the millstone and the fifth floor the bins where grain is dumped before it is ground.

The mill stocks are steel with wooden lattice sails and canvas or other cloth cover can be substituted to produce additional power. The sail framework is tilted back slightly to catch the full impact of the wind and the wings are curved slightly so the wind strikes them at an angle. During strong winds, workers tie down the sails and the brake is applied to the drive wheel.

De Zwaan is the only authentic working Dutch windmill in the United States. The mill grinds an average of nine tons of grain which it sells during the tourist season. During a typical spring on Windmill Island at least 175,000 blooming tulips greet visitors and during the summer and fall the gardens feature colorful annuals.



Dedication Day, April 10, 1965

It took about six months to reconstruct De Zwaan to its full 125 feet, but on April 10, 1965, it was formally dedicated on Windmill Island. On Saturday, April 10, 1965, Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands dedicated De Zwaan, along with a distinguished party including Netherlands Ambassador to the

United States Carl Willem Schurmann and Michigan Governor George Romney.

Maynard recalled that during the dedication a piece of wood broke off from the mill and nearly hit Michigan Governor George Romney and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands who were pulling on a rope attached to a piece of wood to symbolize the release of the mill's brake. They brought down the timer instead.

Prince Bernhard presented the City of Holland with an antique map of the Zaan district, showing the location of De Zwaan before it was moved to Vinkel. Businessman Carter Brown of the City of Holland accepted the map from the Prince. The Netherlands government flew a bottle of water from the river that flowed past De Zwaan in the Zaan District and presented it to the City of Holland during the ceremonies so that De Zwaan would always have part of its old homeland nearby.

The map and the bottle of water were put on permanent display in the mill. Diek Medendorp remained in Holland for most of the summer after De Zwaan was dedicated and he met His Royal Highness Prince Bernhard. Eventually Diek returned to the Netherlands, but he was back in Holland, Michigan at the beginning of the 1966 season to train the new miller, John Heuvel, a Dutch-American from Williamsburg, Virginia.

Die Medendorp Decorated De Zwaan's Blades

Diek Medendorp decorated De Zwaan's blades in the traditional Dutch wedding style when Janet Wichers, the daughter of William Wichers who handled the negotiations to bring the windmill to America, got married.

Windmill Island grew and continued to expand and its developers asked Diek Medendorp to find an antique Dutch carousel in the Netherlands. He found one in Groningen and in 1972, the carousel became part of Windmill Island.

As he trained millers and workers to ensure De Zwaan's survival, Diek Medendorp made lasting friends, including Maynard Schrotenboer and Bob DeNooyer. He built a one tenth size windmill which DeNooyer later donated to Windmill Island.

A Fugitive Hides in DeZwaan

De Zwaan evoked strong memories for one visitor to Windmill Island. One man who visited De Zwaan every year told mill staff members how he had hid in the windmill when he was a boy in the Netherlands during World War II. When the Nazis came to arrest him for trying to save a Jewish boy, the man fled his town. While the Nazis searched for him, he climbed into the mill and hid between the millstones for several hours. After he had immigrated to Indiana, he would visit De Zwaan every year and reminisce to employees.

De Zwaan, Diek Medendorp's Memorial, Continues to Operate Twenty First Century Style

At anniversary reunions, De Zwaan employees who worked on Windmill Island since it opened to tourists in 1965, reminisce and make video tapes recording their experiences. Former Holland City Mayor Al McGeehan was one of the over 200 former "windmill islanders" and their families with fond memories. He and others like him remained supporters of Windmill Island and were instrumental in adding banquet facilities and other amenities to the Island. A Tulip Festival is held every year in May.

Windmill Island also features a canal with a Dutch drawbridge, a 1631 gabled farmstead, and several wood frame Zaandam houses. When the winds blow at about 15-20 miles per hour from the west, De Zwaan's 80 foot blades turn in the wind as they have done for centuries.

In 2007, Alisa Crawford who was De Zwaan's miller, traveled to the Netherlands to receive additional training and she met Diek Medendorp. In a newspaper interview with the Holland Sentinel, she noted that "It was important to me to let him know that the amount of work he put into the project to allow De Zwaan to have a home in Holland, Michigan is still very appreciated. It was so wonderful to meet in person and make that connection, to thank him and to reassure him that DeZwaan is still loved, used and enjoyed 40 plus years after his work."

On January 4, 2011, Diek Medendorp died in Zuidlaren, the Netherlands, at age 89. In Holland, Michigan, following Dutch windmill tradition the blades of De Zwaan were set in the mourning position. De Zwaan remained shrouded in black sails for three days to mourn Diek Medendorp who reassembled the 250 year old De Zwaan.

De Zwaan still operates as steadfastly and steadily as the wind blowing its sails through the past, present, and future. The windmill is a living memorial to Diek Medendorp whose life and work tie Holland, Michigan, and the Netherlands even more closely together.

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