

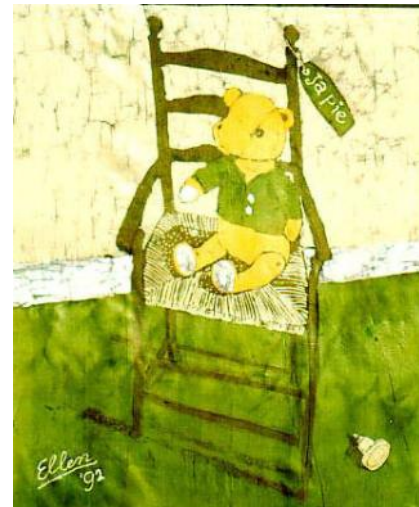
WHAT HAPPENED TO LITTLE PETER or How a Teacher was Born

There are girls who love dolls, and there are girls who do not. I belonged to the second group. The only toys I used to play with were teddy bears, of which, at a certain time, I owned thirteen. I was eight years old then, and I used to spend all my spare time with my bears, mainly giving them singing lessons. To me, they were like real living beings. Each had his own voice (which I did not recognize as my own) when they took turns in repeating the lines I used to sing to them. Such was the happy situation when World War II broke out.

We woke up one night because of strange noises. There were lights in the sky, and shooting, although, at the time my sister and I did not recognize this as such. My parents came running up the stairs. They did not know what was happening, but said it was safer downstairs. As the bombs began to fall, my sister and I sat under the table, strainers on our heads as make-shift helmets. 'This must be war', our father said. At first, I cuddled Japie, one of my teddy bears, and found at least some comfort.

As time went on, food became scarce and there were no more toys in the shops. Strangers began to come to our house in Den Haag, the town in the Netherlands where our family lived. Always, when leaving, they would carry something away: the silver cutlery, our skates, my mother's jewellery and then, for a short time, there would be a little more food. My sister and I knew that our parents were exchanging much valued possessions for food, but this did not bother us for there was a loving, caring atmosphere in our house, and though we were often afraid this was always of things outside the family.

One day I was taken aside by my father. Gently, he explained that there was no food left in the house. He told me that he had been approached by one of his colleagues who had a little daughter. This girl's birthday was coming up, and her father had asked if he could have one of my teddy bears in exchange for a pound of beans. 'Imagine', my father said, 'we could eat most of the beans and plant some in our garden.' This would mean food for a considerable time. Sadly, I agreed to the deal even though it meant parting from a much-loved toy, but I was proud of being able to help the family.



This was the beginning of a gradual dwindling of my collection of bears until I had only one left: little Peter, a tiny teddy about 5 cm tall. With beautiful soft yellow fur and tiny pink soles to his feet. I can still remember how happy I was when my parents told me that, come what might, I need never give up this last, treasured bear.

One day, one of my school friends celebrated her birthday. It was customary at our school for children to treat their fellow-pupils on such occasions. Before the war the treat would consist of sweets or fruit, but these were no longer available. Therefore, her mother had unravelled an old woollen sweater and used the wool to make thirty-two little dolls to hand out in class. We were told that these were 'good-luck dolls'. Our teacher seemed to like the idea. She told us that we could bring our little dolls to school where they could sit on our desks, keeping an eye on our work.

I had never liked dolls, but I did like the idea of having some small thing which might bring me luck sitting on my desk, so the following day I left my new doll at home and took little Peter to school instead. But as soon as I put little Peter on my desk I knew that I was in

for trouble, for my friends crowded around me, wanting to touch him, wanting to know where I had got him or who had given him to me, and asking his name.

The teacher came to see what caused the disturbance, then sternly told me that she had given permission to have 'good-luck dolls' on our desks, but that she had not mentioned any other toys. Before I knew what was happening she had confiscated little Peter and, taking him with her to her table, she put him in the 'holiday box'. My tears were of no avail. The teacher simply reminded me of what I already knew: all confiscated objects would be returned to their respective owners at the end of term.

The last school day before the summer holidays was traditionally a bit of a feast day. First, we would play games, sing songs, listen to a story. Then we would get our school reports with a few personal words from the headmaster. Finally, before the bell would ring, the holiday box would be produced. One by one the teacher would take the confiscated objects from the box and return them to their owners with a few appropriate words. When the day came, I could hardly sit still as I waited for my turn. Today, I would have little Peter back. How I had longed for this moment... I had literally counted the days to this time of opening the box. Surely little Peter would still be there, waiting for me. But why did it take so long? Another pencil sharpener, a piece of chalk, a colouring pencil. But then, at long last, THERE HE WAS.

The teacher read my name, looked at me, ;looked at one of my class mates. .. a dear little friend of mine... looked back at me; then said that she felt sure I did not mind her giving this small toy to Lowie who had no toys at all. But I did mind! I remember the tears running down my cheeks. I silently wept, realizing that I could never ask Lowie to return Peter to me for I well knew that she was right: Lowie had no toys. But I can still feel the hatred for this teacher who took away my last remaining teddy bear, surging through me. I was only ten years old at the time, but it was at this moment that I decided to become a schoolteacher, a better one; one who would always take the feelings of her pupils seriously.

A few weeks later Lowie and his family, who were Jewish, were taken away to a German concentration camp. They were never heard of again. I can only hope that Lowie was able to take little Peter away with him and that this little bear may have given him at least some comfort.