God's Smuggler

One Man's Mission to Change the World

Written with John and Elizabeth Sherrill

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‘God may ask you to become part of the answer to your prayers. If that happens, rejoice, for then you will be participating in the greatest adventure imaginable!’

– Brother Andrew

‘Our very mission is called Open Doors because we believe that any door is open, anytime and anywhere . . . to proclaim Christ.’

– Brother Andrew

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Preface

Nobody doubts that Russia and other Communist countries are different places today than they were a few years ago. They are more open, more receptive to new ideas, more available to the traveller.

What brought such changes about? While the great matters of economics and politics are being analysed by the experts, a small but highly significant factor has gone largely unnoticed. This is the creative work of a tiny group of ordinary men and women – of a single man in the beginning – who have done their part in changing history.

When we first met Andrew we knew at once that we wanted to tell this story. There was only one trouble. Much that was current in it could not be told, for this would place people in danger. Even in the part that was history, certain facts would have to be altered. In most cases real names could not be used; certain places and dates would have to be disguised. And of course the actual techniques involved in border-crossing and smuggling could not be disclosed.

But with all these safeguards there remained a story so unique, so human, so full of significance for the future of us all, that we

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felt this much should be written now. Andrew grew up in a typical small Dutch town, the son of a not-too-prosperous blacksmith. Like everyone in the early 1950s he recognised that the overwhelming challenge to our generation was the third of the world under Communism. Like us, he knew that the Communist bloc was closed to the West – certainly to an unsponsored private individual like himself. Like the rest of us, he knew that you couldn't walk into Russia and Hungary and Albania and China and start preaching a different way of life.

And at this point, his story becomes quite unlike the story of anyone else in the world . . .

John and Elizabeth Sherrill
GUIDEPOSTS
Carmel, New York

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Smoke and Bread Crusts

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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 pedalled 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, 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 wood-burning 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-pedlar'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.

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Another favourite 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 twenty-five 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

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bastion of law and rectitude. If our little townhall 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 flavour 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 centimetre'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

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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 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 parlours in the nineteen thirties, 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.

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