



Dimphna

'My vivid memory of Dimphna was of her wending her way singing through the cornfields to my place of hiding, a basket of cherries over her arm.' Thus recalls an evader, who had the good fortune to find a place of safety with the Sterckx family in June 1944. His Lancaster bomber had been shot down on its return from an air raid over Dusseldorf on the night of 22/23 April 1944.

Dimphna was born on 24 April 1926 in the Flemish speaking town of Geel in the province of Antwerp in Belgium and named after its patron saint. This was the site of a major battle between the British and the Germans in September 1944 during the liberation of Belgium; the British finally forcing a retreat on the part of the Germans on 13 September.



Frans Sterckx and Clementina Heyns

Dimphna lived with her parents Frans Sterckx and Clementina Heyns and two siblings Alfons and Jules on a small farm, Hoge Hof, to the south of Geel, not far from the Albert Canal. Frans Sterckx as well as being a farmer kept horses and bees and like many in the area, the family made their living off the land. Until the outbreak of war, their lives followed the rhythm of the seasons and demands of rural life. Their living was a profitable one enabling Dimphna to attend a prestigious boarding school in

Berlaar near Lier where she met her lifelong friend Josefina De Kinder, widow of Jef Sels.

Dimphna was 13 when the Second World War broke out and in May 1940 the Germans invaded and occupied Belgium. As the war progressed, the occupation became more repressive and life became

increasingly difficult with rationing, curfews, deportation of Belgian civilians to work in German factories and persecution and deportation of the Jewish and Roma populations.



Marriage of Marcel & Dimphna in 1947

Against this background, life and work on Hoge Hof went on and Dimphna during this period got to know, fall in love with and become engaged to the son of a neighbouring farmer, Marcel Maes. He came to live with the Sterckx family and worked on the farm to avoid being conscripted to work in Germany. Dimphna and Marcel married in 1947 and later Marcel was to become the Head of the Technical Department in Geel's equivalent of the local council. They had three children, Frans, Jan and Marie-Christine.

Organised resistance to the occupation in Belgium began to take root in 1941 and took a number of forms from sabotage, clandestine press, intelligence gathering and of course the organisation of 'lifelines' to save Jews and Roma from deportation and later to assist allied airmen who had been shot down over Belgium. Initially these airmen were helped to escape from

Belgium to England via France and Spain via the 'Comet' escape route. In the spring of 1944, in anticipation of the Allied invasion, this route had to be abandoned. The Comet group had to find alternative solutions which meant the growing number of evaders now had to be sheltered locally, often changing places with the consequent risk of detection.



Drawing of 'Hoge Hof' in Geel Liessel by Frans Aldelhof

The Sterckx family became involved in the Geel 'resistance lifeline' through a chance encounter with a surveyor who was working on the then recently completed Albert canal. The surveyor got to know the Sterckx family and was invited to Hoge Hof for a meal. He then revealed that he worked for the 'lifeline' and suggested to Frans & Clementina that they might also wish to be involved and they agreed.

From that day, Dimpna's young life and the lives of members of her family and Marcel were to change dramatically as their farm and family home became a safe house for evaders. This was dangerous work, vulnerable as the 'lifelines' were to infiltration and detection. As is well known, many members of the Belgian resistance were captured, tortured and executed. After the Normandy invasion in June 1944, the Comet escape route for Allied airmen through France to neutral Spain & then home became far more difficult and with the number of airmen in Belgium needing an escape route increasing, so did the risk of detection.

Places of concealment, not only from the Germans but also from neighbours and other prying eyes had to be found including in the cornfield when it was fine and until it was learnt that the German military would be carrying out manoeuvres in the area. Otherwise hideaways in the attic or in a barn were created. To access the latter, two loose boards in the back wall of the barn had to be removed revealing a stack of bricks which was in fact a small room with a candle, mattress and bucket. Food would be passed through a small opening in the bricks.



Peter Knox, Dimpna Sterckx, Reg Brookes June 1944

Two allied airmen, Peter Knox (Australian) and Reg Brookes (British) were sent to Hoge Hof by the White Brigade (the local resistance) in 1944. Between 28 June and 10 August their stay overlapped with both airmen then being transferred separately to Brussels via Turnhout. French was the language of communication as none of the Sterckx family spoke English.

In his memoir¹, Peter Knox recalls his first meeting with Dimpna and her brother Jules

who had come to the home of Jeanne Leemans Schlessler (a leading local Resistance figure of the Geel Section of the GL "Geheim Leger" – Secret Army) who was later captured and tortured but survived.

Dimpna and Jules escorted Peter through the streets from Geel to Hoge Hof. Peter wrote, "*It was the first time they had undertaken such a mission and it was a feat of great courage on their part as I was obviously a foreigner to this region. Many dangers existed for them.*"

With the Germans all around, there were many moments of danger and anxiety. In his memoir², Reg Brookes recalls a German patrol approaching the farm with Alsatian dogs on leashes. On their way, the three Germans had to pass the cherry orchard where they stopped to pick cherries instead of carrying on

to the farmhouse! Reg recalls Dimphna's huge relief that despite their ferocious barking, the dogs had not been released to find a scent trail to his hiding place in the cornfield.

On another occasion when Reg was hiding in the house he had been invited to join the family for breakfast. They were all startled and terrified when they heard the sound of rifle butts banging on the door. Two German soldiers were after fresh eggs and they went on their way once they had been given what they wanted.

Dimphna played a key role in the running of the household and both Peter Knox and Reg Brookes recall the family's hospitality and generosity inviting them into the house when it was considered safe to share meals and to use the house's facilities. Notes that were written by Peter Knox and Reg Brookes at the time of their stay with the Sterckx family have been recently discovered. They pay tribute to the warmth and care taken by their hosts to ensure their safety and well-being.

Both men wrote their memoirs to thank and pay tribute to the bravery of the Belgian resistance and to keep alive the memory of people like Dimphna and her family who risked their lives to provide refuge and safety to two allied airmen. After the war, both Dimphna and Marcel received medals for their work for the Resistance.



Memorial to the crew of flight ME 846, Mol Postel

In 2006 Jane, the daughter of Peter Knox and her husband Marjan Kiepura brought together the Maes-Sterckx, Knox-Kiepura and Brookes-Johnson families with other families and former members of the resistance at a ceremony in Mol Postel. The occasion was the unveiling of a memorial stone to the memory of the pilot and crew of the crashed Lancaster ME846 from which Jane's father, Peter Knox had bailed out. The pilot's body was never found.

Dimphna is home in and close by. Her husband Marcel died in of 63. Her brother Jules died tragically Kenya in 1957 and her other brother Peter Knox died in 1998 and Reg Reg's farewell visit to Dimphna was in families of Peter and Reg remain in family and they will never forget her or did for them.



91 and lives in a care Geel with her children grandchildren living 1987 at the young age in a car accident in Alfons died last year. Brookes in May 2014. September 2009. The touch with Dimphna's what she and her family

Written by : Frans Maes, Jane Knox, Liz Johnson
March 2017

¹ Peter Knox's memoir ² Reg Brookes' memoir 'Echoes from the Past'

Post Scriptum

Dimphna Sterckx-Maes died peacefully in her care home (Wedbos) in Geel surrounded by her family on 10 November 2017

Her funeral took place on November 16, 2017. Dimphna was many things during her life: loving daughter, wife, sister, mother, grandmother and loyal friend as well as a brave member of the Belgian Resistance. It was for all of those things that her family including her grandchildren remembered her at her funeral service; their love and memories captured in the moving poem translated below:

*Dearest mother,
The sun will shine for you on the other side.
He came to take you now.
Be free and let yourself be guided by his hand.
Without you it cannot be as before,
but we know that our Dad is waiting on the other side.
Now you're back together.
We are grateful for the pleasant memories.
And remember that we will continue to honour you
not in days of pain and sorrow,
but as you were in the radiant sun
when you could still do everything.
Where are we going to get the stories from the past?
God's garden must be beautiful.
He only takes the best.
Rest softly, dear mother*

The service celebrated the many facets of Dimphna's life with music, readings, poetry, photographs, flowers and recollections of her wartime resistance work. It included Flemish songs, Fernando by Abba (one of Dimphna's favourite songs), a reading from Paulo Coelho, 'We'll Meet Again' (Vera Lynn) ending poignantly with the Last Post.

The reading of the story of her life at the service had at its heart the memory of someone called upon to do extraordinary things in extraordinary times. Those of us, for whom Dimphna has always been part of our lives because of what she did for our fathers, will never forget her. May her memory live on and may she rest in peace.

Jane Knox, Liz Johnson
March 2018