The month of May sees the 60th anniversary of Victory in Europe, a war in which deaths were counted in the millions. People living during the war years had to endure many hardships including food rationing. However, this latter proved to be a blessing in disguise, as people were generally healthier with rationing than at the present time, except where the diet was severely restricted.

Professor of Medicine, Peter Nathanielsz, states, '… the health we enjoy throughout our lives is determined to a large extent by the conditions in which we developed in the womb. How we are ushered into life is the major factor that determines how we leave it. The quality of life in the womb, our temporary home before we were born, programs our susceptibility to coronary artery disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity and a multitude of other conditions in later life.'

It was wartime rationing that put Nathanielsz's and other researchers' conclusions into perspective. Not surprisingly, wartime starvation and near-starvation levels affected the health of those concerned. In what has come to be called the Dutch Hunger Winter (September 1944 – May 1945) the German forces imposed starvation as a reprisal for the airdrop of paratroopers at Arnhem in Holland, and with interesting health consequences.

Male children born to mothers exposed to the starvation measures in the first third of their pregnancy had a greater tendency to obesity later in life; and to women starved in the final trimester of pregnancy a decreased likelihood of later obesity. In general, children conceived during the Dutch Hunger Winter had a higher incidence of diabetes and schizophrenia.

The 872-day Siege of Leningrad also had health consequences as a result of the food shortage experienced at that time. Babies conceived around or during the siege were later found to have a higher heart disease susceptibility.

It is not suggested that people today should adopt the severe dietary restrictions that are current in wartimes, then or now. The average calorie intake by the Dutch during the occupation by the Germans averaged 1,500 cals per day. This dropped to 750 cals a day at the start of the Dutch Hunger Winter, and down to 450 cals daily by May 1945 when the people ate a little bread with turnips, potatoes and tulip bulbs!

We do not need telling that food is important to our health. Now many suffer a surfeit of food and often of the wrong type or proportions to safeguard well-being. As Victory in Europe is remembered it would be a good goal to also remember Victory in Eating and make every V E Day a celebration.