

## PIERRE VAN PAASSEN'S CANADIAN INTERLUDE

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Author of a number of best-sellers and other books in America in the forties and fifties, journalist, gentile Zionist, and ordained Unitarian minister: such were the varied successes and interests of Pierre van Paassen (1895-1968).<sup>1</sup> Van Paassen was born in the Netherlands, but his Canadian years from 1914 to 1921 profoundly influenced his life and career. It was during his residence in Canada that he learned to express himself with color and verve. Furthermore, during this time he renounced his plans to enter the Christian ministry and chose a journalistic career instead. Finally, his service in the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France during World War I had a significant influence on his life.

Pierre van Paassen was born in Gorinchem, or Gorcum, an old medieval city located near the confluence of the Waal and Meuse. The Meuse separated the Protestant from the Roman Catholic Netherlands, and as a youth Van Paassen was often struck by the sharp contrasts between these two different civilizations and mentalities, Calvinism and Roman Catholicism.

Gorcum has a population of about 12,000 at the turn of the century and was an old garrison town. Although the local population might have resented the military presence in their midst, the garrison did provide the community with its principal source of income. The city was also an important agricultural trading center. However, in general most residents of Gorcum were poor as was the middle class Van Paassen family.

Pierre's father, Adriaan van Paassen, was of Flemish extraction, but his family had lived in the Netherlands for some 28 generations. Still Pierre contended that his father was a stranger in his town because he was of Flemish ancestry! Pierre's paternal grandfather, Amos van Paassen, came from Rilland-Bath, located on the island of South Beveland in the Province of Zeeland. Amos was a pastor but later entered the shipping business. Pierre's grandfather, Pieter van Paassen, was a Reformed pastor in Franeker, Friesland at the time the family emigrated to Canada. Pierre's father, Adrianus (Adriaan) Laurusse, was born in 1870 in Zaamslag, in the southern part of Zeeland. His mother, Antonia Catherina Sizoo, was born in Gorkum in 1864. The Sizoo family was of Waldensian extraction and had fled Italy to France and then to the Netherlands in the 17th century during the persecution of the Huguenots.

Pierre's parents had a small pottery store in Gorcum and were lower middle class. They had three children, Pieter (Pierre) Antonie Laurusse, born on February 7, 1895, Thomas, born in 1896,

and Jozinus, born in 1898. The latter died in 1911 shortly before the van Paassens left the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> The three children grew up in a Calvinist community and home, and Calvinism never seemed to lose its grip on Pierre in spite of his later embracing of liberal Christianity. As he wrote in later years: "I have carried Calvin on my back thirty-five years and sometimes I still feel fragments of him adhering to my shoulders."<sup>3</sup> Since his parents did not agree on religious matters, his home became a "house divided against itself."<sup>4</sup> His father was a member of the Reformed Church and tended to view the Christian faith somewhat skeptically. His mother belonged to the Gereformeerde Kerk (Christian Reformed Church) and was a devout and stern Calvinist. In Gorcum she ran a small religious meeting hall where she preached the Gospel to "harlots, vagabonds, drunken fishermen, soldiers and nondescript little old women." She was opposed to any form of levity and could not easily make a declaration of affection. The children's lives were overshadowed by a cloud of gloom and an atmosphere of joylessness. Man was considered a creature lower than a worm, a miserable sinner, doomed to hellfire. Most forms of amusement, sports, and athletics were frowned upon; everything was "sin, sin, sin...." Even in later years, when he had renounced the Calvinist beliefs of his youth, van Paassen found it difficult to enter a place of amusement.<sup>5</sup>

At the age of six Pierre entered the local Calvinist elementary school, the School with the Bible. His experience must have been excruciating. The school, Pierre lamented in later years, was a model of authoritarianism where pupils were considered and treated as little automatons without a will or inclination of their own. The discipline was "ascetic, almost penitential..."<sup>6</sup>

There were some liberal influences, however. Perhaps the most significant was his uncle Kees Sizoo, his mother's unmarried brother and a local landscape painter. Uncle Kees was a freethinker who introduced the sensitive boy to Goethe, Tolstoy, Voltaire and Renan. He also took him along on long excursions to neighboring Brabant and Flanders, during which Pierre learned more history and folklore than from all his school books. Pierre stated later that his uncle had been the only liberating influence in his life. That was not quite accurate. His experiences at the local public high school gymnasium were also very significant for his mental and spiritual development. "When I entered high school," he wrote later, "I felt as though I had suddenly been released from prison and thrown into a world as unfamiliar as the Arabian desert." Most of the instructors did not consider

the Christian faith of much consequence and were liberals, skeptics, agnostics, or humanists. Also influential in his life was his paternal grandfather Pieter van Paassen, the Reformed pastor in Franeker, in whose parsonage Pierre stayed in 1911. His grandfather tried to shun all dogmatic assertions and to penetrate people's minds with ideas of justice, charity, freedom, and beauty.<sup>7</sup>

Yet Pierre was not a convert to modernism at the time he left for Canada. He had been taught that the Bible was the "all in all" and that the modernists and Unitarians were "vile heretics," "sons of Belial," and "false priests of Baal," who were not to be touched with a pair of tongs.<sup>8</sup> However, the seeds of doubt had been sown, and although his childhood was one of "radiant happiness", he had a difficult time as a boy in this Calvinist environment disentangling the story of divine love from the "vengeful character attributed to God by his orthodox teachers." Even in later years, when he joined the Modernists and Unitarians, he never seemed to have had that "wonderful equilibrium" which believers referred to as the peace that passes all understanding, and all his life he suffered the "deepest spiritual anguish."<sup>9</sup>

Gorcum also had a small Jewish congregation, and one of Pierre's best friends was David Dalmaden, son of a local Jewish merchant who later perished in a Nazi death camp. Pierre's mother and other faithful Calvinists were not anti-Semitic, but they did believe that it was their Christian duty to convert Jews to the Calvinist faith. For this purpose Pierre and his friends distributed copies of the paper *Priël*, published by Professor J. H. Gunning, among the local Jews. The results of these missionary efforts were rather meager, however.<sup>10</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s Pierre became a leading Zionist, perhaps the most important gentile Zionist of his day, and eloquently espoused the restoration of the Homeland for the Jews. Paradoxically, his Zionism was in part the result of his Calvinist upbringing. According to the Calvinist interpretation of Dutch history, the same God who had led the ancient Israelites out of the wilderness into the promised land had also led and shielded the Dutch Calvinists in their struggle for freedom against Catholic Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries. God had His chosen peoples, the Israelites and the Dutch Calvinists, and used them for His purpose in human history.<sup>11</sup>

When the family went to Canada, Pierre was 16 years old and had finished four years of high school. Yet at the time of his departure from the Netherlands and his native Gorcum he must have been a fairly mature, impressionable, sensitive and perceptive young man. His autobiographical accounts demonstrate an acute awareness of social, economic and other problems of his day. Furthermore, he had demonstrated ability to relate well to people, a quality that would help him in his future journalistic career.

Because of some severe reverses on the stock market, Pierre's father decided to go abroad temporarily to recoup some of his financial losses. While he was considering whether to go to South

Africa, Canada or elsewhere, the youngest son died. This tragedy so severely affected Mrs. van Paassen that she needed a change in environment. Therefore it was decided that the entire family should go abroad. Canada seemed to offer the best prospects for land speculation, and so in May 1911 Pierre and his brother Thomas set sail on the SS *Teutonic*. Their parents followed and joined them in Toronto six months later.<sup>12</sup>

The number of Dutch immigrants in Canada at this time was relatively small, amounting to a few thousand individuals. Most immigrants to the New World settled in the United States where they had family or religious contacts. Dutch immigrants in Canada lived in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. Few went to Toronto; they usually chose the wilderness, where many experienced severe hardships while trying to survive.<sup>13</sup> The van Paassens escaped these ordeals, although they did not arrive with any wealth. Adriaan van Paassen was so disappointed with Canada when he arrived that he decided to return to Gorcum as soon as possible. He lacked the financial resources to do so, however, and remained in Canada the rest of his life. Pierre's first job was that of a biscuit packer in Toronto. But at the promptings of a Rev. J. E. Gibson, rector of the Church of the Ascension, he decided to consider entering Wycliffe College. He disliked the Anglican service, however; it was too "Romish," he felt. Subsequently, he enrolled in Victoria College in 1914 to study for the Methodist ministry. At the same time he enrolled at the University College in English and literature.<sup>14</sup>

After his third semester, Pierre was notified that he should continue his studies outside the walls of Victoria College and enter the mission field. Subsequently, he went to Alberta to work among the Ruthenians near Edmonton. His mission work was not a great success. Aside from the language barrier, which Pierre was able to overcome in part because of his remarkable ability to learn foreign languages, the Ruthenians did not seem to be very receptive to van Paassen's message. Furthermore, when the Ruthenians voted to raise funds for the construction of a battleship for the British war effort, Pierre asked to be relieved of his task. At this time, unlike most Calvinists, Pierre was a sincere Christian pacifist who believed that preaching the gospel of love and peace was incompatible with the raising of money for the purpose of constructing battleships.<sup>15</sup>

Although Pierre renounced his pacifist views in 1917 and enlisted in the Canadian Armed Expeditionary Force, he remained ambivalent on the issue of non-resistance. Years later, on the eve of World War II, he wrote that the real heroes of the war had been the conscientious objectors. They were the real defenders of "Christianity's own and fundamental principles." Furthermore, he argued that war had brought out the basest instincts and was the result of the capitalist nations' efforts to sustain their system of production. Yet in 1941, while decrying war as a supreme evil and its existence as a betrayal of Christ, he felt that the spiritual defense and progress of the world alone

would not protect mankind from the onrushing forces which were intent on blotting out Christianity and democracy forever.<sup>16</sup>

In 1915 Pierre returned to Toronto, where he studied another year before he left for a new mission field, Golden City (Porcupine) and Timmins, in the gold mine area in Northern Ontario. Here he served as an assistant pastor in three churches. He also organized high school studies among Scandinavian immigrants in Pottsville, and read and studied such thinkers as Ernst Troeltsch, Walter Rauschenbusch, James Martineau, and Matthew Arnold. Gradually, he came to reject "the peculiar interpretation" given in orthodox seminaries of the utter sinfulness of all human creatures and the necessity of the sacrifice of the son of God for the redemption of the race. He could no longer believe that the Savior had come into the world for the removal of original sin and the attainment of salvation. Orthodox Christianity taught the negation of life, while he came to accept life and loved this world. The sermons he preached seemed to have a Social Gospel orientation and urged the Christian church to emulate the Socialists. Socialism was "the only reminder in the world of today of the original impulses of Jesus." He rejected the idea of celestial compensation as a most convenient doctrine imposed upon the so-called underprivileged by the reactionary classes as a police measure to block the rising tide of discontent and revolutionary sentiment. By the spring of 1916 he had reached a spiritual crisis and decided to abandon the ministry.<sup>17</sup>

In 1917 he returned to Toronto, where he was asked to follow a course that would lead to a commission as a military chaplain. He rejected this offer and instead joined a body of pacifists, antimilitarists, and conscientious objectors. But in the end, the argument that the war was a righteous war won. Perhaps his gradual rejection of much of his religious upbringing motivated him in part to desert the pacifists. His Uncle Kees's influence might also have contributed to it. Kees Sizoo retained his contact with Pierre, who was probably his favorite nephew, fervently hoping that he might return to Gorcum. Sizoo wrote Pierre regularly, a total of some 262 letters over a five-year period, and argued that he would fight against Prussia. His concern for the possible doom of French civilization may have been another motivating factor, although Van Paassen's love for France would come later during his long stay in Paris as a foreign correspondent. His discussions with Newton W. Rowell (1867-1941), leader of the Liberal opposition in the Ontario Parliament, and Justice John J. MacLaren (1872-1926) of the Supreme Court of Ontario, were also important. Both men argued rather persuasively that this war would set the world free. The conversations with these gentlemen followed an incident in which a woman screamed at Pierre to avenge her three sons, and a mob following him pinned a white feather through his coat. When Justice MacLaren promised van Paassen a position of interpreter with the army, Pierre enlisted the next day in the Corps of

Guides.<sup>18</sup>

After brief military training the men were sent overseas to the western front in April 1917. Van Paassen does not tell us much about his war experiences. His unit did much railroad repair near Abbeville and Hazebrouck and tunnel digging at the front line. In May 1918 he was trapped in a tunnel for two days, an incident in which his left hand and arm were fractured. After three months of recuperation he returned to the front, doing mainly intelligence work. He was near Mons on November 11, 1918. On the same day his commander, Ross MacDonald, a person to whom he had become much attached, was killed; he was one of the final casualties of the war.<sup>19</sup>

Van Paassen was one of the many millions of disillusioned and restless demobilized men who returned home after the war. He and many others felt that they had been deprived of everything that made for human dignity. He would try to forget the nightmare and efface every trace of his shame and humiliation. Since he certainly did not want to return to his theological studies, he enrolled in a telegrapher's course but dropped out after a short while. He also worked in a department store and returned to the Porcupine gold mines.

Finally, through the services of the Bureau of Soldiers' Civil Re-Establishment, he obtained a journalist traineeship with the Toronto *Globe*, the leading liberal newspaper of his time. The editor of the *Globe*, Thomas Stewart Lyon (1866-1946), who probably saw a spark in this young man, personally intervened to hire him. At about the same time, in 1920, he married his home-town sweetheart and first cousin, Cornelia Machelina Sizoo. But because Pierre was not challenged by his work, which consisted mostly of reporting city news, he considered entering a government program of land development for discharged soldiers. His first "scoop" saved him from this adventure. By accident he met a French and a German missionary who had just returned from Dutch Borneo and had not heard about the war in Europe until 1918. Editor Lyon instructed van Paassen to write the story, and at the same time asked him to become a regular member of the staff allowing him to write on anything he liked. Henceforth his column became a regular feature of the *Globe*.<sup>20</sup> But van Paassen would not stay long with the *Globe*: he left Canada when in 1922 he was offered a promising position with the Atlanta *Constitution*.

Few Dutch immigrants in Canada at that time would do as well in such a short period of time as van Paassen. His excellent Dutch secondary education at the local Gorcum Gymnasium, his adaptability to a new environment, his courage and sense of adventure were some of his principal assets that enabled him to secure the kind of position for which he was most suitable by temperament. But he owed much of his success to his new adopted country, Canada. The great variety of experiences, adventures and challenges since his arrival in Canada helped him to mature and find his direction. Perhaps strangely, van Paassen never expressed his appreciation for what Canada had

offered him. His only real expression of appreciation concerned Canada's flexible and democratic educational system that had enabled him to enroll at Victoria and University College in Toronto.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, his Canadian experiences never became a source of inspiration for his works. Many if not all of his books were inspired by his experiences as a youth in Gorcum. This theme, which revolved around his Calvinist upbringing and his fascination with Zionism, a product of his Calvinist training, were the principal leitmotifs of his books. This was unfortunate. Great story-teller that he was, he could have given us a fascinating picture of the rough-and-tumble mining frontier of Northern Ontario, added to our understanding of the Canadian experience in World War I, and provided us with a glimpse of the Canadian newspaper world. It seems that instead the ghost of John Calvin continued to haunt him for the rest of his life.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Van Paassen's first best-seller was **Days of Our Years** (New York, 1939), which by 1943 had gone through 22 printings. Other popular works were: **That Day Alone** (New York, 1941); **The Time is Now!** (New York, 1941); **The Forgotten Ally** (New York, 1943); **Earth Could Be Fair** (New York 1946). **Newsweek** reported on May 6, 1946, that these books alone had sold one million copies (p. 96). **Days of Our Years** and **Earth Could Be Fair** were partly autobiographical, as was his last work **To Number Our Days** (New York, 1964). Other post-war publications were: **Why Jesus Died** (New York, 1949); **Jerusalem Calling!** (New York, 1950); **Visions Rise and Change** (New York, 1955), a study of religious conditions in post-Stalin Russia; and **A Crown of Fire. The Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola** (New York, 1960). This author used van Paassen's works for biographical data and was also kindly assisted by Mr. Hugo van Paassen. Pierre van Paassen's autobiographical accounts are sometimes contradictory and contain erroneous dates.

<sup>2</sup>**Days of Our Years**, p. 9, 29; **That Day Alone**, p. 125, 130, 220; **To Number Our Days**, p. 10, 11, 96; Gorinchem, Gemeentelijke Archiefdienst.

<sup>3</sup>**Days of Our Years**, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>**To Number Our Days**, p. 41; **That Day Alone**, p. 190.

<sup>5</sup>**Visions Rise and Change**, p. 9; **Days of Our Years**, pp. 23, 33; **That Day Alone**, pp. 159-160; **To Number Our Days**, pp. 26-27.

<sup>6</sup>**Days of Our Years**, p. 5; **To Number Our Days**, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup>**Days of Our Years**, pp. 15, 18-19; **To Number Our Days**, p. 42, 43, 69. Van Paassen attended the local *gymnasium* from July 1907 to April 1911. Letter from Rector J. Th. K. Marcellis, February 6, 1981.

<sup>8</sup>**Why Christ Died**, pp. 11-12.

<sup>9</sup>**To Number Our Days**, pp. 12, 27-28. See also **Jerusalem Calling**, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup>**Earth Could Be Fair**, pp. 115 ff.; **Visions Rise and Change**, pp. 18-19, 38-41.

<sup>11</sup>For his Zionist views see esp. **Days of Our Years**, pp. 362 ff. **Jerusalem Calling**, pp. 165 ff.

<sup>12</sup>**To Number Our Days**, p. 84; **Days of Our Years**, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup>Henri Lucas, **Netherlanders in North America** (Ann Arbor, 1955), pp. 459 ff., p. 646; Van Paassen, **That Day Alone**, pp. 382-392.

<sup>14</sup>**To Number Our Days**, pp. 85 ff.

<sup>15</sup>**To Number Our Days**, pp. 94 ff; **Days of Our Years**, pp. 53-55.

<sup>16</sup>**Days of Our Years**, pp. 61, 67, 70, 75, 76; **The Time is Now**, pp. 5-6.

**To Number Our Days**, pp. 110 ff.

<sup>17</sup>**To Number Our Days**, pp. 110 ff.

<sup>18</sup>**Days of Our Years**, pp. 21, 60, 64, 65; **To Number Our Days**, pp. 121-123.

<sup>19</sup>**To Number Our Days**, pp. 125 ff. **Our Forgotten Ally**, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup>**To Number Our Days**, pp. 223 ff.; **Days of Our Years**, pp. 91-97.

<sup>21</sup>**To Number Our Days**, p. 91.