

## UTRECHT IN THE FIFTIES

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Fig. 9

View of the Dom

do than work. My father accepted the offer and, consequently, just before World War II, we moved to Maarn some twenty

Just west of the city, precisely at the intersection of some of Holland's major highways, there used to stand a farmhouse, my grandfather's, and it is there that my father toiled away his youth. My mother who originates from Loenen, Gelderland, worked in Utrecht for one of the city's "better" families. My parents met at the yearly circus and since they were no longer spring chickens (during the Depression relatively few people could afford to marry young), they were engaged soon thereafter. My grandfather gave them one thousand guilders as a wedding present which permitted my father to open a cornerstore not far from the railway station. It is there that on a yearly basis my mother presented him with six children of which I was number five. In the meantime, my father received an offer to buy a small rundown dairy from a member of the Nazi party who had better things to

kilometers south of Utrecht. He died in the same village in 1947 of the effects of war as well as of having had too many mouths to feed, for there were eight children with number nine about to be born, and more immediately and directly of blood poisoning - he was bitten by a dog while delivering milk - and of a stroke.

All this was suddenly brought back to me some five years ago, when on a whim I decided to go and have a look at the cornerstore behind which I was born thirty-five years ago. While I was studying the nondescript premises, two old ladies noticed me and identified me instantly: "You are the son of . . . With the exception of the beard you are his spitting image." At that same moment, I saw again the photograph of my father as it has sat forever on the buffet, with him looking wistfully out over the world with steady large eyes, his face clean shaven and his hair neatly combed.

When I returned to Utrecht for the first time in the early fifties so that I might begin my highschool studies, I had no memories at all of the city. Maarn had made of me a shy, country boy and Utrecht was as alien to me as is any large city to a bumpkin. Each time the bus neared the city limits and I could see the outlines of its taller buildings, especially the Domtower, which as we were all told was Holland's highest structure, I had difficulty suppressing my tears, such was the extent to which I had been intimidated by my stern teachers and my roughneck classmates.

The first school I attended in Utrecht was controlled by religious brothers and they ran the place as a training camp. In those day, Holland was most definitely not the stronghold of liberalism that it has apparently become since. During the first week of classes our English

teacher repeatedly rapped certain students on the head in order to demonstrate how tough he could be if the need ever arose. The school also employed a Franciscan priest whose task it was to take the boys one by one to a small room in order to extract confessions from them about their and their friend's sexual mores. Hence, in order to keep me on the straight and narrow, I was forbidden to travel to school with a boy from my village whose sister had had a child out of wedlock.

I made only one friend during my three year stay at that school. He was not from Utrecht but from Ysselstein. He was a precocious and bitter young man. He was ashamed of the fact that he came from a large family and that it had its origins in a city which for a long time had been a haven for criminals. He claimed to have become a member of the Communist party at the ripe age of twelve and he asserted that he had specialized in setting off stinkbombs in Catholic churches. He and I competed for the highest mark in every course and more often than not he beat me. Since he was definitely the better student, it was a source of constant frustration to him that he could not match me in calligraphy. (Obviously, elegance and intelligence are not necessarily found together.) With a few other students we were kept after hours in order to receive further instruction from the principal in mathematics and in physics. I received such a persistent dose of both subjects in those three years that I have never wished to study either again. The principal was a tall man who bore a striking resemblance to Pope Pius XII, a fact of which he was inordinately proud. His other claim to fame was his supposedly superior teaching methods which, as he repeatedly explained and illustrated, consisted of abruptly lowering

his voice in the middle of a sentence because he had discovered years ago that this tactic attracted people's attention.

Our sense of humor was still at an embryonic level at that age. One of the brother's names was Patricius so he was renamed Brother Partridge. Another teacher was bald so he received the name Cham after the biblical figure. At the yearly school party he received a comb and a jar of Brylcream. He was not amused and stormed off the stage in a huff. We declared that surely he was a man without wit. Aside from the principal, we were in awe only of our German teacher. He had a knack of presenting us with such difficult tests that we were compelled to prepare for days on end. He had the ability of taking sentences out of the exercise book and recombining them in such an odd fashion that he had even the cleverest amongst us stumped. An example such as the following would not be unusual: "The young boy whose bicycle was propelled into the wild, blue yonder after having bounced off the wall was not inadequate at performing similar acrobatic feats."

I was not sorry to leave that school. I was trained very well there but I learned very little and when I was sent to St. Bonifacius Lyceum I quickly forgot about my recent past, because I entered a world so new, and so different that it took all my energies to acclimatize myself. The lyceum was touted as a high class institution frequented primarily by gentlemen and where, consequently, one was to dress and to comport oneself in aristocratic fashion. Being from a family which had been on welfare for some time and which for its frills, such as clothes, depended on the kindness of strangers, I was made to stand out in a most painful way. Not only did my poverty show in a glaring manner but some

of my more dandified fellows were not hesitant to let me know what they thought of the poor. In fact, the school possessed a definite class system and admiration and respect went only to those with the right family name. It will not surprise anyone that in these well-established circles anti-semitism and pro-nazi sentiment were still very much alive. Many of the students had relations who had been prominent in the world of music and of literature in the thirties and who had been active collaborators. Officially, they had recanted but I never heard anyone express regrets in private; on the contrary!

Our teachers were a variegated lot. Our religion professor was a converted Calvinist minister who had been given a job in our school on the assumption that he knew the Bible well. We never discovered what he did know because the class was in a constant uproar. This unfortunate man was not only ugly (he looked like a toad), he was also paranoid. On occasion we would decide not to harass him but this would make him so suspicious that our good behavior soon ended. The history teacher was an exceedingly tall but stooped man who, because he did not like the textbook one of his colleagues had written, decided to dictate his own course. He was very serious and very bright and gave all of us writer's cramp. The science teacher was a most peculiar man. He would pick out someone in the class as his bête noire, focus on him exclusively and consequently ruin most of his scientific demonstrations. I remember him chasing globules of mercury, dropping liquids on the front of his pants (result: instant hilarity), and breaking pipettes.

Actually, what I recall best from my highschool days are the social activities. It is then that I discovered movies, music, and dancing. Not ever having seen a movie, the first ones came to me as a total revelation. I saw

La Strada and its music echoes through me to this day. As well, it confirmed me in my innate gloominess as it stresses that all good things must necessarily end badly. I saw Roman Holiday and I promptly fell in love with Audrey Hepburn. In music, jazz was all the rage and I fell in with the trend. Then, one autumn day we all decided to go to a school of dancing. Immediately, I dropped Audrey and I became enamoured of my instructor, one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen. Even then there must have been several million blue-eyed, blonde Dutch girls but to me she was the one and only one. She was also the first girl to break my heart, an act which she accomplished with the most consummate skill.

By that time I was already in the last year of high-school and it had become time to think about the future. Some of my friends were already in the army and what they told me about basic training did not entice me. In addition, I had finally learned how to enjoy life. Every morning I took a ten minute train ride to Utrecht, ambled towards school, never failing to pass underneath the Domtower, and my evenings were spent reading in the public library which is situated between the lyceum and the Domtower. Even if most courses at school left me totally indifferent, I had already and unwittingly chosen my career. In the village of Maarn I had turned to books because there was little else to do but read, ride your bicycle or kick a tincan around. In Utrecht, the public library was the best and cheapest entertainment for I could usually only afford what was free. I read everything from the best-sellers to most abstruse and incomprehensible texts that I could lay my hands on. One day I decided to emigrate to Canada and without telling anyone made the necessary preparations. I decided to leave because I had already met enough bullies and I did not want to meet any more in the

army, but also because I was tired of being dependent on the generosity of strangers and I looked forward to a less confining country without the condescension born of class and the obtuseness born of provincialism. Therefore, I left Utrecht without regret. What it gave to me, I found personally on the shelves of its public library. What it did not give me, I found in Canada through hard work and through the generosity of its land and of its people.