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Autobiography in Dutch and English: The bilingual self-life-writing of Madzy Brender à Brandis

In this journal for Fall 2000 appeared an article by Augustinus Dierick dealing with a book entitled *Land voor onze zonen*, by Maxine Brandis. She was my mother. Her real name was Madzy – the “Maxine” was recommended by the publisher of *Land for Our Sons*, the English-language version of the book, which preceded the Dutch one. The journal issue was sent to me by Joan Magee and Henny Ruger, who have known our family for many years and published some of my mother’s writings at the Netherlandic Press. They thought I might be interested in the paper: I was very interested indeed, not least because I was then at work on a biography of Madzy - *Frontiers and Sanctuaries: A Woman’s Life in Holland and Canada*, which was published by McGill-Queen’s University Press in 2006. The “frontiers” and the “sanctuaries” of the title refer to the two conflicting needs in Madzy’s personality, the need for adventure and the need for safety, for “away” and for “home”. Most immigrants are no doubt familiar with that conflict.

Madzy van Vollenhoven was born in 1910 in Scheveningen. Her parents had just returned from the Dutch East Indies, where her father had been district manager for a tobacco firm. Back in the Netherlands in 1910, he ran for Parliament – the *Tweede Kamer*, the equivalent of the House of Commons – and was elected. He served until he was asked to become managing director of the Bank of the Netherlands. He died in 1923. In school, Madzy specialized in classics, and then she studied law in Leiden. Just before her final

examinations, she went to the United States to marry Wim Brender à Brandis, a Dutchman (and distant relative of hers) who was working in New York; two years later, in 1938, they returned to the Netherlands, and Wim became an officer in a cavalry regiment.

After May 1940, when the Dutch army was demobilized, Wim studied agriculture and forestry and worked in estate management until, in May 1942, he was taken prisoner by the Germans. Madzy spent the rest of the war ensuring that she and her two small children (I was the elder) survived the dangers and shortages of life in the occupied and war-battered Netherlands.

Wim returned from the camp in 1945, another child was born, and in 1947 the family emigrated to northern British Columbia, where we lived on a pioneer farm. (Wim, now known as Bill, came from a professional-class family but had always wanted to have a farm of his own.) A few years later Madzy contracted rheumatoid arthritis, and it was partly to obtain better medical care for her that the family moved to Vancouver. Madzy and Bill used their Dutch education to obtain “advanced standing”, which allowed them to earn Canadian university degrees.

In 1958 they moved to Antigonish, Nova Scotia, where Bill worked in the Extension Department of St. Francis Xavier University and Madzy

became the librarian for the Department's small library. When Bill's job petered out, he found another in Burlington, Ontario. Madzy, by now quite handicapped, spent more and more of her time writing.

In 1965 Madzy and Bill used an inheritance to build a house on six acres of land north of Burlington. Madzy died there in 1984.

She was a prolific writer. Only a small portion of her work was published, partly because in the 1950s and 1960s, when she was doing most of her writing, there were far fewer opportunities than there are now for publication, and partly because her rheumatoid arthritis made both hand-writing and typing so painful and laborious that she seems only to have revised and submitted work that was commissioned (such as newspaper columns) or that she thought had a good chance of being accepted. Yet she *was* published: we have 68 of her columns and some other short works, as well as the book-length memoir, *Land for Our Sons* and its Dutch version (translated by Madzy herself) titled *Land voor onze zonen*.

Her papers fill a big cardboard box, and that does not include oversize items and several ring binders of transcriptions of material that she put on tape. As I read them, after her death, I soon became aware that, though she had seemed to be a very private person, she had in fact been writing autobiography all her life. It was, apparently, *because* she was reserved in her dealings with other people that she felt the need to record her inner life in a form which she could keep to

herself if she wished, but which she preserved through several dozen moves, and which she expected others to read after her death. Two years before her death, at the beginning of yet another diary – she had already written several – she wrote this, which I use as the epigraph of the book:

My aim is to be as free and uninhibited in putting down my very inner thoughts knowing that no one will read them as long as I live. After my death I do not care what one thinks or knows of me; the more of me and my thoughts the better, for then they won't put me on an unearned pedestal. Rather let my real self appear, something I so often try to hide. For they often think or pretend to think that I am a better or more honest person than I am. This really bothers or worries me. [p. 1]

That statement is an amazing “gift” for a biographer (me) to receive. It gave me a strong sense that I was working *with her*, doing what she wished me to do.

Some of her work was deliberate, direct autobiography, but there are autobiographical passages – sometimes disguised – in almost everything she wrote. Because I came to know all her work (and her many different voices) so well, and partly because I knew *her* well (we were very close, and I was 46 when she died) – I learned to detect autobiography where it appeared in her journalism, historical writings, fiction, everywhere.

The autobiographical passages which I have selected, and which are arranged in chronological order, create a mosaic of styles, contexts, voices. I give them here in the language in which she wrote them.

This first is from one of a number of columns that she wrote for *Het Vaderland* when she was living in the United States. (There appear to be at least seventeen of them, but we have only eight). It dates from 1937, her first summer in suburban New Jersey.

Het is zomer geworden.

En met de zomer zijn wij tot een andere levenswijze overgegaan. ...

Met den zomer zijn veel veranderingen gekomen en mijn pas-verworven positie van oude bekende in dit land heeft een gevoeligen schok te verduren gehad. Na vele strubbelingen kreeg ik zoo langzamerhand het veilige gevoel van met al het nieuwe in dit land vertrouwd te zijn geraakt en nu komen weer talloze onbekende toestanden mijn rust verstoren. Juist begon ik de nieuwe aankomelingen te bekijken en hen over Amerika in te lichten als iemand, die er door jarenlang verblijf verstand van heeft (een der eerste van de vele stadia, die een vreemdeling doormaakt), en nu heeft de zomer mijn wankel prestige vernietigd; ik sta weer even groen en onwetend me te verbazen en het onbekende af te wachten!

De huizen hebben een ander aspect gekregen. De screens hebben hun intree gedaan; dat zijn houten frames met vliegengaas

en men heft ze voor alle ramen en round alle porches gezet. Ze zijn tegen de muggen; zonder screens zou men nooit met open ramen kunnen zitten

She goes on to write about other changes in the house, such as replacing winter curtains with summer curtains – an interesting bit of social history.

On 29 November 1939, my baby book contained a piece of military history. Wim's unit was, by then, stationed in a small town near Apeldoorn. Shortly after his arrival there, Hitler massed troops just across the border, causing a crisis. Madzy wrote in the baby book:

Weken zijn er voorbij gegaan, weken van mobilizatie, spanning en zwerven. Wij logeerden een week in Den Haag. Toen werd Wim overgeplaatst en gingen we bij hem in Apeldoorn wonen. Dit duurde maar 10 dagen; toen de ergste spanning kwam. Toen vluchten we 'snachts naar Den Haag. Maar na 't opklaren van de spanning trokken we clandestien weer naar onze dierbare Pappa.

(Wives and children were not allowed to live near family members who were on active service.)

One of her most important and detailed pieces of autobiographical writing is a diary which she kept for three years during World War Two when Wim was in a German prisoner-of-war camp. The whole diary – which is about 80,000 words in length – is a letter to him, for him to read when he returned home.

13 Juni 1942. Het Oranje-Hotel is ontruimd naar Utrecht. Alles is daar ge-evacueerd. Door de radio wordt gewaarschuwd van “gevaarlijke plaatsen” weg te gaan of schuilkelders van de bezettende macht te eisen. Begrijpen ze dan niet dat er geen cement meer is, en dat het hier overall gevaarlijk is? Met het eten is ‘t ook slecht; we krijgen in 3 weken 1 bosje wortels en 2 verlepte slakropjes, en 10 kilo aardappelen – bonnen zijn verlopen en heb ik niet gekregen. We eten veel bruine boonen of capucijners.

17 December 1942: Oh, als je eens wist hoe ik luister naar iedere trein, die langs komt, naar iedere stoomtrein, ook ‘snachts als ik wakker lig of als ik Gerard voed. Die treinen zullen mij vooreerst niet uit de zenuwen raken. Vandaag voor 4 maanden wist ik pas zeker dat je helemaal ver weg van me was in Deutsland. De wond gaat weer bloeden, als ik er aan denk. Ik moet maar in de toekomst denken en niet meer denken over die smart, die ellende, dat verdriet.

In 1954 – by then living in Terrace, BC, and afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis – Madzy wrote a number of fragments of autobiography. These were mini-essays, finger exercises as she explored a new medium and sought a “voice” and subject-matter in English.

My personality does not fit into this particular moment. There is nothing in this special space of time that attracts me. Most of the time I float blissfully through the days without realizing that one’s personality has to fit into

them as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. They do, miraculously, until one becomes aware of a halt, a misfit; and that is when life hurts. Sorrow, death, frustration, they all can hurt in their own ways but not as fiercely as when one feels an odd piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

I plan to write a book. I have got to do something with myself now that I have to stop doing other things I like better. I don’t want to write. I don’t even know how to write.

The book she wrote was *Land for Our Sons*, which is all autobiography.

In the following twenty-five years, with her physical activity increasingly limited by the arthritis, she wrote the bulk of the work we now have. In 1962 she began what was to be another major work, a series of columns for *De Nederlandse Courant*. She wrote 32 of these; sometimes they appeared weekly, but clearly the arrangement was that she would write when she could. There were periods when her health was so bad that she spent most of her time in bed. The columns were headed “Koffiepraatje”, but they were more than superficial chit-chat. They deal with issues of importance to other immigrants, and she focused mainly on women. This, from an undated column, draws on her experience of our first trip back to the Netherlands, in 1958-9. It was probably written after Wim went to the Netherlands alone, which he did several times.

Het is zeker enkele van U wel eens overkomen, dat een lid van de familie naar

Holland ging, voor zaken, of ziekenbezoek, of zomaar alleen voor vakantie. Neen, ik bedoel niet met zijn allen; dat is een heel ander geval. Dan pakken we allemaal onze koffertjes, we leven allemaal in reuze spanning. Iedereen wil van alles meenemen, dat toch niet meekan, vooral niet als je met een vliegtuig gaat. ... Neen, dat is een heel ander ding, wanneer er alleen maar *een* van het gezin gaat, meestal de vader. Van te voren heeft hij het extra druk met zijn werk, en daarom moet de moeder-de-vrouw maar voor alles zorgen. ...

Ze wil, dat haar man netjes voor de dag komt, zodat ze aan de overzijde niet kunnen zeggen: "Wat zitten ze daar toch slordig in de kleren." ...

En dan, als het laatste overhemd gestreken is, en de laatste das geperst, als het nette pak keurig van de stomerij is gekomen, en alle sokken gestopt zijn, en als de laatste kus gewisseld is, de laatste groet gewuifd ... dan valt er een beklemmerende leegte in het hart, dat achterblijft. En dit is het moment, waarop je jezelf afvraagt: "Wat zijn we toch begonnen? Waarom hebben we ooit dat onzalige plan van te gaan emigreren genomen, en nog uitgevoerd ook?"

This has the clear ring of autobiography. We know from letters she wrote to Wim while he was away on that trip that she was desperately homesick for the Netherlands. Her actual agony is not revealed in the column, the rest of which is a thoughtful, compassionate admonition to homesick immigrants to recognize that through the difficulties of making a life in a strange land,

and of longing for "home", their characters develop strength – a strength that sometimes they themselves are not aware of.

I will conclude with a short passage written at about the same time as that column, in the early or middle 1960s. It is from a piece titled "Just Mom". The speaker is a mother who is wakeful in the middle of the night. She is aware of being worried, and after wandering through the sleeping house she sits down with a cup of cocoa to analyze her feelings. She addresses her son: "I worry because of what will happen to you now that you will be soon grown-up." Parenthetically she writes, "How good it feels to say just what comes to my mind, without anyone interrupting the trend of my thoughts. It is just me with myself, just Mom with Mom." Then she continues:

I worry because I am afraid of what the world is going to do to you, my boy, that dark and scary world outside my kitchen window. That world full of crime ... and accidents that has been there ever since I grew up, and that has grown worse ever since then. ... But will you go into that world? Are you really stepping into the world I visualize? What do I really know about it? You are not really going into a world of my imagination, but into a world of your own. You are building up your world, and you understand it far better than I do. I warn you about dangers which may not be there, which probably have stopped to exist, pushed aside by others. I do not know the others, but you do. ...

Oh, darling I see it now.... Because I felt the world around me was changing, it scared me, and I warned you, and criticized what was real to you and unreal to me. The world goes on while Mom stays put.

These few samples barely hint at the enormous amount and variety of autobiographical material that Madzy wrote. I have not given passages from her letters, or her fiction, or her historical writings, though *Frontiers and Sanctuaries* does. The variety of tones, styles, and voices is itself autobiographical, hinting at the complexity and diversity of Madzy's inner life, her perceptions and reflections. In the finished autobiography that she never wrote, this variety would probably have been smoothed out: the work that she completed and polished for publication is mostly – understandably – less lively and immediate than her unpublished work.

The fact that Madzy preserved most of her papers indicates that she was aware of the importance of the record she was creating. She had the self-awareness that is essential for writing autobiography, the confidence that her experience and ideas and feelings were worth recording. The fact that the work she had published, or submitted for publication, contains abundant autobiography indicates that she was willing to share her life experiences with other people in the hope of helping them.

The autobiographical impulse survived the move from Dutch to English. That is something that

can never be taken for granted, because the impulse has its roots very deep in the psyche and might well, in a case like Madzy's, have been rooted too deeply to be transposed into another language. After the move to Canada, she might well have continued to write autobiography in Dutch, or she might have fallen silent. But the transplant was successful, and she was not silenced.

This issue of transplantation is important. Life-writing is about articulating experience – everything from a brief anecdote to a full-length autobiography or memoir. At its most serious and significant, it requires of a writer enough facility with language to articulate experience and thoughts, to give expression to deep feelings. Madzy certainly had this facility in Dutch, and it is significant that she acquired it in English too. She was able to speak – in both languages – about her innermost self and the reality of her experience.

Her story is larger than “the immigrant experience”. It is a story about the triumph of the human spirit, and human creativity, under daunting – even crushing – circumstances. Within those circumstances she made the largest and richest world for herself that she could. In her history of Canada for Dutch immigrants, she writes, “Explorers are we all,” and certainly she was an explorer. Her mind and spirit and creativity ranged far. Not only the subjects that she explored, but the triumph of the spirit are recorded in what she wrote. Because she was a writer as well as an explorer, she left us a map.

Appendix:**Madzy Brender à Brandis's published work**

- "Het Nieuwe Leven in [Canada?] [clipping does not include complete title]. In *Emigratie*, a magazine published by the Dutch government. Winter 1959-60 issue.
- "Hoe ver en toch hoe na". Article in *Nitor*, the publication of Vereeniging Vrouwelijke Studenten Leiden (VVSL), probably published in 1960.
- Brandis, Maxine, "A Call in the Fog", in *The Atlantic Advocate*, Vol. 49, No. 9, May 1959. Published by the University Press of New Brunswick Limited, Fredericton, New Brunswick.
- Brandis, Maxine, "Adult Student", in *The Atlantic Advocate*, Vol. 52, No. 9, May 1962. Published by the University Press of New Brunswick Limited, Fredericton, New Brunswick.
- Brandis, Maxine, "All That Counts", in *The Atlantic Advocate*, Vol. 52, No. 3, November 1961. Published by the University Press of New Brunswick Limited, Fredericton, New Brunswick.
- Brandis, Maxine, "Foreigner in the Family", in *The Atlantic Advocate*, Vol. 51, No. 12, August 1961. Published by the University Press of New Brunswick Limited, Fredericton, New Brunswick.
- Brandis, Maxine, "The Living Christmas Tree", in *The Atlantic Advocate*, Vol. 50, No. 4, December 1959. Published by the University Press of New Brunswick Limited, Fredericton, New Brunswick.
- Brandis, Maxine, "To Grow into a Man", in *The Atlantic Advocate*, Vol. 54, No. 3, November 1963. Published by the University Press of New Brunswick Limited, Fredericton, New Brunswick.
- Brandis, Maxine, *Land for Our Sons*, London, Hurst & Blackett, 1958.
- Brandis, Maxine, *Land voor onze zonen*. Utrecht, Prisma-Boeken, 1960.
- Brender à Brandis, Madzy, *April Snowstorm*. Carlisle, ON, The Brandstead Press, 1977.
- Brender à Brandis, Madzy, *Pekoo, the Cat Who Talks / Pikou, le chat qui parle*. Carlisle, ON, The Brandstead Press, 1971.
- Brender à Brandis, Madzy, *The Scent of Spruce*. Windsor, Ontario, Netherlandic Press, 1984.
- Columns for *De Nederlandse Courant in Canada*, published in Burlington, Ontario. She wrote 32 columns; of them, the clippings of 22 of them include the dates, which run from October 1962 to February 1964, and the remaining 10 probably fit between, though some may have been written shortly after February 1964.
- Columns for *The Casket*, the local newspaper in Antigonish, NS. She wrote 14 columns between November 1958 and probably May 1959 (most of the clippings we have are not dated).
- Columns for *The Maritime Co-operator*, published by the Extension Department of St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, NS. She wrote 14 columns, which were published between November 1958 and July 1959.

Columns in *Het Vaderland* between January 1937 and probably summer 1938. We have copies of eight columns, but the numbering of the carbon copies suggests that there might have been as many as seventeen. Perhaps not all the ones she submitted were published. Only the first is dated.

Madzy Brender à Brandis's surviving

unpublished work:

A diary of her life in war-time Holland, May 1942 to June 1945.

A tape, made in 1976, based on this war diary.

A considerable number of short stories and autobiographical narratives.

A number of tapes dealing with the results of research reading.

Family memories about her parents' life in the Dutch East Indies, and Madzy's memories of her own youth in the Netherlands up to about age 16.

A history of Canada for Dutch immigrants.

A history of the Netherlands for her children.

Several dozen letters on paper and on tape (the only survivors of the thousands she wrote).