

## What's in a cup of coffee?

Jenny Radsma

At home or abroad, the Dutch, irrespective of political or religious persuasion, have consistently nurtured a powerful culture, one centered on *gezelligheid*. My parents, who emigrated from The Netherlands, and their circle of Dutch friends did likewise, which included the prominence of *koffietijd*, coffee-time. In the post-war years, a freshly brewed cup of coffee represented so much: abundance, liberty, and freedom from want. A cup of coffee offered a pause from one's daily routine bringing with it momentary comfort and relaxation – a reminder that, at least for now, all was well. A *gezellig kop koffie* carried a potent expectation of sharing –with family, friends, and newcomers alike. Failure to offer one another the hospitality of a full-bodied cup of coffee was *ongezellig*, even ill-mannered. In this essay, a Canadian-born daughter of immigrant parents recounts the centrality of *koffietijd* during her formative years, its role in her life persisting long after moving away from a community of Dutch people with their custom of *gezellig samen een lekker kopje koffie te drinken*.

Key terms: Coffee; *gezelligheid*; Dutch-Canadian culture; immigration; identity.

Growing up as I did, the child of Dutch immigrant parents, personal and family friendships grew from within the Dutch community, people like us settling into their lives in Calgary. With them we had more than language in common; our shared beliefs and customs served as the bedrock by which to order our lives and our relationships. When friends and family dropped by on one another, they could be sure of an invitation to come in for coffee. By the time a second cup was poured, the exchange of stories and laughter were well under way. All of it contributed to the heart of Dutch culture: *gezelligheid*, a word defying satisfactory translation into English. Cozy, comfortable, and convivial reflect an approximate meaning. But the ambience of a place including the hospitality and togetherness of people also encompasses *gezelligheid* as, for example, when good friends catch up with one another in a cozy café. In my family, a *gezellig* evening almost always began with a cup of coffee.

For a long time, I naively assumed that others adhered to similar ways, including the daily coffee and tea breaks by which we could set our clock. Years after leaving home, well after transitioning to work and life in a non-Dutch environment, an innocuous encounter on a wintry day led me to offer someone a cup of coffee. Its polite refusal caught me aback and caused me to examine how rooted and embedded the cultural implications of the coffee tradition still remained for me.

"Can I make you a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks," my landlord says, "I'm almost finished here; my wife will expect me soon."

A late afternoon on a mid-January day, and barely a week after moving into his house, I've had to call Brent about a plumbing problem. He makes his way in and out of the living room to the shed out back where the water pump is. Wires, duct tape, and tools in hand, the bitter cold outdoors is etched in the pallor on his face. He leans momentarily into the warmth radiating from the gas fireplace.

I ask again, "Are you sure? It's no problem to make something hot. You must be cold to the core."

"No, thanks just the same."

"Really, I don't mind. I'd hate for you to drive home so cold. I can give you a car mug if you like."

"No, no, that's fine," he smiles.

Why my dogged persistence, I wonder, despite his courteous but definite refusals? Then I hear his wife, or think I do, asking when he gets home, "Didn't she offer you anything while you were there? Not even a cup of coffee?"

The voices and images change to my parents, my sisters, and me, seated around our supper table in the kitchen, talking about the events of the day. My father says something like, "Ja, so cold it was today. All my customers offered me a cup of hot coffee. What have I good customers, *hè Mem!*"

With their prominent Dutch accent, my parents say "ver" instead of "were," "vat" rather than "what," and "that" sounds like "dat." When they call me by name, "Jenny" becomes "Yenny."

"Oh, ja? That doesn't happen so often with those *Canadese* people," my mother, ever the skeptic, replies.

My family judged people by the degree of personal warmth and friendliness they extended. The measure of their genuineness and goodness came through their offer of a cup of coffee.



*Figure 1. Coffee time. The author's mother, who prepared the coffee, shares a break with her husband (the author's father) during one of his early to mid-1980s backyard construction projects. From the author's personal collection.*

After the war, coffee became available to the citizens of The Netherlands long before most of them could resume life in homes of their own where they could brew a fresh pot. Because cleanup and reconstruction took so long, many young families looked to Canada, where opportunities for employment and home ownership beckoned. Thus, in the early 1950s, my parents packed their *kist*, and with their three young daughters, they crossed the Atlantic by boat, then journeyed by train from Halifax to Calgary. I am the first child born in Canada, and a few years later a fifth daughter rounded out our family. The possessions my parents brought with them to Alberta included small pieces of furniture, their clothing, as well as my father's Calvinistic zeal. The manual coffee grinder came along, too, so they could make *echte*, real, coffee.

At home or abroad, the Dutch, irrespective of political or religious persuasion, nurtured a powerful culture, one centered on *gezelligheid*. My parents and their circle of friends did likewise, and that included *koffietijd*, coffee time. Who knows when the social tradition began of *samen een lekker kopje koffie*

*drinken* ('have a good cup of coffee together')? Certainly, the Dutch were among the first to grow the coffee tree in Europe. As far back as the early 1600s, coffee beans taken from Yemen were planted in Amsterdam's botanical gardens where they flourished. These cultivation skills were eventually used to develop extensive coffee plantations in the Dutch colonies, most notably the island of Java. As a result, The Netherlands became a major supplier of coffee to Europe.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch culture of *gezellig koffietijd* endured some setbacks. The lean years of the depression gave way to five years of German occupation during another world war. Coffee went from being expensive to attainable only through the black market. By the time it disappeared altogether, the need for food overwhelmed the desire for coffee. Thus, in the post-war years, a freshly brewed cup of coffee represented so much: abundance, liberty, and freedom from want. A cup of coffee offered a pause from one's daily routine bringing with it all that was loved and familiar. A *gezellig kopje koffie* carried a potent expectation of sharing – with family, friends, and newcomers alike. Failure to offer one another a cup of java was *ongezellig*, even ill-mannered.



Figure 2. Relatives in The Netherlands chatting over coffee, approximately 1955. Author's personal collection.

Just as when they lived in Holland, *gereformeerde* immigrants like my parents attended the Dutch Reformed church. My father took seriously his responsibility for the spiritual wellbeing of his family and ensured we attended both services, once in the morning and again in the evening. After church, usually the morning service, people visited at one another's home to drink coffee and eat a homemade slice of cake or a creamy, sweet *gebakje* purchased from the bakery the day before. Traditions of after-church lunches served in church halls belonged to those "*Canadese mensen*", those Canadian people who my parents felt nervous around because they spoke fluent English. Canadian Baptists or Anglicans didn't ask one another over after church to share a cup of coffee in their homes. Instead, they sipped coffee from styrofoam cups in the church basement or met at a nearby cafe. By contrast, we Christian Reformed people, God's covenant people no less, would not dream of going to a restaurant for coffee on Sunday. Not only was it *ongezellig*, but short of an emergency, buying anything on a Sunday, certainly a cup of coffee, was sinful.

No, on Sundays, the Radsma family got dressed up in their Sunday best. With my father at the wheel, we drove the few miles down Bowness Road, across the Shouldice Bridge, then turned left up 52<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. Maranatha Christian Reformed Church sat on the rise of the hill overlooking the Bow River, where on the western horizon, the snow-capped Rocky Mountains shimmered in the distance. After the worship service, congregants, all Dutch-speaking immigrants like my parents, mingled outdoors with one another. Among the adults, men lingered, their calloused hands holding a cigarette or slung into the pockets of their Sunday suit grown shiny from years of wear. Perhaps they talked about their work or discussed the text of the morning sermon while breezes played with their thinning hair. Women, in small circles, clutched their hats with gloved hands and shared news from the past week. Young children ran about on the gravel parking lot, unbuttoned coats flapping at their sides. Before long, boys in hand-me-down trousers and girls hiking up their sagging leotards would tug at their mother's neatly pressed skirt.

"What are we doing now, Mom?" they asked. "I'm hungry."

Parents answered in Dutch, or as with my parents, in Frisian, the language of my mother's home province, Frîslan. We piled into our Volkswagen bus, my three sisters and me, for my oldest sister – 16 years old by now – had already gone with her young people friends to meet at someone's home where they would have coffee together just as we were about to do. Regardless that it was almost noon, *koffietijd* lent structure to the day, and on Sunday a *gezellig kopje koffie* always came before eating the midday meal.

We frequently visited with family and friends, but equally often, friends or out-of-town church visitors came over to share coffee with us at our home. Going

home to coffee and pastries without the company of friends or newcomers felt lack-lustre. We enjoyed the energy others lent to our Sunday. But no matter where we went, whether home or to someone else's place, the selection of baked goods warded off our hunger pangs.



*Figure 3. The author visiting with Dutch friends in High Level, Alberta with after-dinner coffee and cake, ca. 1995. From the author's personal collection.*

We loved visiting the Van Geemens, an older couple whose grandchildren were the same age as my sisters and me. Mrs. Van Geemen, with her hearty laugh and generous spirit, poured us kids sweet drinks with ice cubes that clinked against the glass. Unlike my mother, she never cautioned us to be careful and not to spill. A slice of her homemade cake smothered in whipping cream and topped with coconut or small canned mandarin orange slices looked and tasted divine.

At home, the cake or cookies my mother or older sister baked the day before in preparation for our Sunday were tasty but not elegant. Nonetheless, my father liked my sister's baking so well, he paid her, not much mind you, perhaps fifty cents each week. In a family where a weekly allowance existed only in story-books, and where every child, however old or young, was expected to pitch in and do her part, such recognition from Dad signified high praise.

"She can make even a stone taste good," my father bragged to friends about my sister's cooking. Mom cringed whenever he added, "... just like my own mother."

Soon after my parents' arrival in Canada, ground coffee, rather than the customary coffee beans, could be purchased in the grocery store. But once in a while, the favorite coffee came on sale only in bean form. At those times, my mother would buy several packages and rather than run each package of beans through the commercial grinder at the supermarket, she took them home and placed them in the pantry. After one such time, I remember coming upon my mother in the kitchen. She sat on a chair, the coffee grinder she'd brought from Holland squeezed between her thighs. The rhythmic swing of her arm as she turned the knobbed handle round and round fascinated me and soon I asked, "Can I do that?"

Mom made it look so easy but soon after I took over, I felt the burn of the muscles in my upper arm, the ache in my shoulders. Seeing my difficulty, Mom had me sit on a mat on the floor where I could more firmly brace the coffee grinder between my legs. But this adjustment did little to make it easier.

"This is hard, Mom," I whined, arching my back, ready to give up. But Mom would have none of it.

"You wanted to help, now you keep going, *trochbite*," she said sternly. With her back to me, she carried on peeling the carrots we'd later eat for supper. Her erect posture told me that I better not abandon the coffee grinding task I'd begun.

In the end I learned that trying to show off by going as fast as I could only resulted in jerky and ineffective motions. By rotating the grinder in a slow methodical way to grate the beans as they fell into the internal metal cogs, that's what it took to fill the small drawer that I pulled out and emptied into the large coffee can. The fresh scent of coffee filled the kitchen, and Mom handed me the package of coffee beans to grind another drawer-full. Perhaps at that point one of my sisters happened upon this scene.

"I want to do that; it's my turn," she'd say.

I handed the coffee grinder to my sister. By now an expert, I gave her directions on the best way to grind the coffee.

On Sunday, upon arriving home after church, Mom would duly hang up her coat, put on an apron to protect her dress, and begin to make the coffee. She filled the clear Pyrex coffee percolator with cold water and placed it on the stove over the gas flame. She reached into the cupboard for the red can of *Edwards* coffee. A scoop or two into the aluminum basket – just the right amount, mind you, to make a good cup of coffee – released the deep aroma of the fresh coffee. Coffee shouldn't be too weak or too strong; in fact, bad tasting coffee implied poor hospitality and an *ongezellig*, unfriendly visit. Although frugal in so many other ways, Mom never tried to save money by buying cheap coffee. Certainly, she

bought extra when on sale, but even then she bought only *Edwards* or *Nabob*; other brands were *rotzooi*, garbage, a waste of money.

Continuing with her preparations at the stove, Mom fit the lid on the coffee pot and positioned it over the burner. Once the water began to dance up the clear stem, she turned down the flame, and the coffee slowly infused into what would become a rich brew. Rarely did it boil over, which gave the coffee a harsh, burnt taste. While the water gurgled in the clear pot, I set out the cups, clanging a *lepelje*, a small spoon to stir in cream and sugar, into each saucer. One of my sisters cut up cake and squares to arrange on a serving dish. The fresh aroma of the perking coffee began wafting through the house, whetting our appetite for what we knew would soon be coming.

Baked goods varied from week to week: *boterkoek* (a buttery almond-flavored shortbread), perhaps an apple cake or oatmeal cookies, and occasionally my father's favorites, cream horns or custard slices from the bakery. Served on small plates, we ate the delicacies with pastry forks. We swallowed each bite with sweet, milky coffee, and we willed the flavour of the last morsels to linger in our mouths for as long as possible.

The living room had, of course, been carefully dusted, vacuumed, and cleaned the day before. Any crumbs that happened to fall on the matted pea-green carpet, recycled from my father's work, would be vacuumed up later in the week.

Even as children, Mom let us drink coffee, liberally diluted with milk. We had our own half-sized cups and saucers, a coffee set Mom bought specially for us. Because it was more *gezellig*, and if we promised to be careful, Mom let us children drink our coffee in the living room. Should a pastry or desert call for whipping cream, Mom set aside enough so that everyone's first cup of coffee could be festooned with a dollop of the lavish treat my father loved so well.

"What was that *lekker, Mem!* Have you more of it?" he'd ask when served another round of coffee.

What remained of the *gebakjes* or cake after we finished our coffee time got covered and put in the fridge. Cookies went back into the *koekjestrommel*, the cookie tin, until the next time we'd have coffee, perhaps after the evening church service or at our evening coffee during the week.

As we reached adolescence, making and serving the coffee fell to us girls, which allowed Mom to remain with her guests in the living room and take full pleasure in their company. In this way, too, Mom could "show off" her daughters, how their social and domestic skills were maturing.



*Figure 4. The author and her sister preparing coffee, ca. 2005. From the author's personal collection.*

"Here's your coffee, Mr. VanderKuilen," I'd say as I offered a guest his cup of coffee. I'd go around again with cream and sugar in Mom's cut glass cream pitcher and sugar bowl used only on Sundays. Finally, I'd serve the pastries and hand out serviettes. By this time, Mom would have set up the metal TV trays and pulled in the end tables so guests could keep one hand free to sip their coffee comfortably without the awkwardness of juggling both coffee cup and *gebakje* at the same time.

Lively discussions took place over coffee, usually following traditional gender interests. Men talked to each other about cars, theology, and politics. Women talked about children, the upcoming bazaar hosted by the Ladies Aid Society, the gossip about someone who found herself unexpectedly pregnant, the wellbeing of aging parents living in Holland.

Conversations came together between men and women as they relayed stories about life and people in The Netherlands, how it used to be there, memories of the war, the relief of liberation, and of course, how different they found everything in Canada. The changes occurring in Dutch society back in their homeland, including the church, were repeated as understood from the letters received from family and friends; mishaps were shared and jokes laughed at, often back to back with a recounting of who was sick, in the hospital, or had died, perhaps from cancer or the euphemism of "female problems". Heads nodded at the costly expense of making a trip back to Holland to visit ailing relatives.

Boisterous arguments also erupted, often initiated by my father and always about something related to the church, be that the doctrine of predestination, election, justification by faith, or a recent decision made by members of the male consistory that my father opposed. My father, convinced he upheld the right view, gestured with his hand and raised his voice. His eyes took on a wild passion when he began quoting Bible verses and citing from an article he had recently read. Not to be outdone, men and women alike would “bite” (as my mother said) at the opportunity to speak their minds and shed their illuminated views in response to my father’s disputes. My mother did her best to divert the conversation to a neutral topic, like the weather, and someone else would try to find common ground in the midst of the heated debate. “*Ja maar* we all worship the same Lord,” someone interjected. Whether he would not or could not tame his intensity, my father remained unrelenting. In his loud voice, he told people how misguided they were in their thinking and what God’s punishment meant as a result. If in earshot of my father’s frenzies, we kids felt embarrassed and confused by his bullheaded rudeness. Surely he would discipline us if we carried on in the same way. My mother, far more mild in temperament than my father, dreaded my father’s outbursts; for her, a truly *gezellig* visit meant laughter and singing Dutch folk songs, not *rûzje* or arguments.

Like many Dutch reformed men of his generation, my father held a decidedly conservative world view. With his literal interpretation of the Bible, he considered himself to be the God-ordained patriarch and head of our household. And like many Dutch people who pride themselves on not mincing words (unlike the Canadians they knew), my otherwise good-natured father could be remarkably loutish, even insulting, when discussing matters of faith. And with his passion for God running high, he wasted no opportunity to initiate such conversations when sharing a cup of coffee with his Calvinist friends.

No matter how heated these exchanges might become, our Dutch friends, many of them equally outspoken and opinionated, almost always parted with a handshake to signify the goodwill between them. These were the same people who prayed for one another and made visitation when illness or tragedy struck and who celebrated birthdays and anniversaries together. And in a week or two, my parents would receive a return invitation to sip a cup of coffee and share a *gezellige* evening together at the home of their friends.

In the meantime, after the last person went home, the china cups and saucers would be washed and carefully placed back in the cupboard ready for next Sunday’s use. Mugs made their eventual way into our household but we rarely used them for company, and certainly not on Sunday. Their large, utility size made them much too *ongezellig*.



*Figure 5. The author's father and uncle while visiting together in St. Catherine's, Ontario, with their mid-morning coffee, ca. 1967. From the author's personal collection.*

Coffee time served an integral part of each Sunday; indeed, coffee time shaped our day-to-day life. Although each day began with a cup of tea at breakfast, you could almost set your clock by the mid-morning *koffietijd*. On weekdays, Dad went off to work and we kids to school. By midmorning, Mom, at home by herself, stopped the chores she happened to be doing – laundry, washing floors, mending, baking, cooking, whatever. By 10:00, she glanced at the clock: yes, it was time to boil the kettle and make a cup of Nescafé. Less robust in aroma and flavor, instant coffee was certainly inferior, but also quicker to make. Besides, brewing a full pot of coffee just for herself would be wasteful. After a 20-minute break consisting of radio music alongside coffee and a couple of cookies, she resumed her domestic tasks.

As her time in Canada lengthened, my mother, now a Canadian citizen and more comfortable with her English skills, invited the neighbor women for a weekday *koffie-klets*, where rituals and posturing were similar to the customary Sunday coffee. The women sat around the kitchen table laid out with cups and baked goods arranged on a plate.

“Mmm, Susan,” as she became known by her Canadian friends, “does this ever taste good. Can I get the recipe from you?”



Figure 6. The author's mother and sister doing handwerk with their afternoon coffee, mid-1970s.  
From the author's personal collection.

In the evening, after the supper dishes had been washed – by at least two squabbling daughters – one of us would make a pot of coffee, the Pyrex pot finally giving way to a shiny stainless steel electric percolator. Because my parents did not care for the taste of drip coffee, they never purchased an electric coffee maker to clutter their countertop.

Just as on Sundays, during the weekly evening coffee something sweet accompanied and offset the bitter taste of coffee. Should the pantry of baked or store-bought goods be empty by week's end, not even a *speculaas* cookie left, Dad voiced his discontent. He hated "dry coffee" as he called it, coffee with nothing to

go along with it; how *ongezellig!* At one such time he stomped from the house and drove to the local grocery store to buy something “*voor bij de koffie.*”

By then, two of his daughters had become nurses, and despite the nutritional information they felt compelled to pass on, Dad never had a weight problem. He worked hard, and he ate sensibly, which, until he died, included *gebakjes*.

In fact, the 1960s of my childhood preceded the current preoccupation with caffeine, fat, cholesterol, and calories. That concern didn’t materialize until the grown children of immigrant parents went on to post-secondary schooling, many to obtain careers in healthcare. With the memory of war and poverty still fresh in their mind, my parents and their friends seldom gave way to over-indulgence. They served coffee in small cups, less than half the amount of a modern-sized mug. Cake and squares were cut in adequate but not oversized portions.

In the warmth of summer, our family coffee time frequently took place outdoors, on the back patio. A tray with steaming cups of coffee would be brought out, complete with *lepeljes*. On another tray sat the cream and sugar containers and whatever we’d eat along with our coffee. *Speculaas* cookies or a slice of *koeke* remained a lasting favorite for us all. *Vrouw Boonstra* gave Mom the *koeke* recipe, one of the first things Mom learned to bake after her arrival in Canada.

If the sun were too bright, Mom asked one of us to bring hats and sunglasses from the house to shield our eyes. Dad, biting into his *koeke*, then slurping on his coffee, would sit back, in pure, undisguised contentment.

“Ah Sjoukje,” he’d say, “What do we live here good, *hè!*”

The custom of Sunday coffee carried on whenever we were in the company of Dutch reformed adherents. Should we attend a Christian Reformed church elsewhere, we counted on the same *gezellige* tradition, an invitation for coffee served with a *gebakje*. My parents did not travel a great deal, but when they happened to visit a church elsewhere, their post-trip stories revolved around the friendliness of the congregation.

“People were so cold at that church,” my mother would say, “no one even asked us over for *koffie!*”

After another trip she might say, “Were the people ever *hartelijk*, so friendly. Three invitations for *koffie!* And did we laugh with the people where we visited! So *gezellig* it was there.”

The ritual of coffee remained equally important when my parents went away on vacation. As beautiful as the scenic landscapes they drove through might be, it was the coffee and pie they encountered along the way that made their road trips memorable. Dad’s retelling of their experiences revealed the simplicity of his pleasures. He detailed all the minutiae and left nothing out.



*Figure 7. A late 1970s family patio gathering – with coffee! From the author's personal collection.*

*"Ja, Mem, was not that the place where we went to the coffee shop? Remember? The waitress – what was she fat – and her apron not too clean, maar she was really friendly. The coffee was so-so. The pie, though, was homemade, and mij a scoop of ice cream, boy, was it ever good!"*

My mother liked to go shopping with her daughters, but she shared an implicit agreement with us that coffee time came attached to our shopping trip. En route, on the bus to downtown or driving in the car to a mall, we talked about where we would go, which department store cafeteria served the best coffee. Our choice included being able to drink from "real" versus paper cups. Without the requisite time-out for coffee, our excursion could not achieve the *gezelligheid* standard.

In time I moved away from home to live and work among Canadians where the order of my days no longer rotated around the custom of coffee and *gebakjes*. On one particular return visit home, I made the mistake of overlooking this daily custom that structured my mother's life. My sisters and I took our mother on a day trip, driving an hour and a half to our destination. When we stepped out of the vehicle, I reached for my wallet, ready to pay for our tickets to the museum we'd come to see. At the same time, I heard Mom say, "Ah, what *gezellig*, hè, to be together today. First, we have a cup of coffee – and I pay."

"But Mom," I countered, turning to face her. "We don't have much time. We have to get back home before the kids come home from school."

My reasoning did little good.

"How *ongezellig*. After driving all that way, to not sit down for coffee for just a few minutes! Hardly worth making the trip," she said, her shoulders slumped in disappointment.

So we went for a leisurely coffee and rushed through the museum.



*Figure 8. The author with her mother and sisters enjoying a sidewalk coffee in Fernie, B.C., ca. 2003. From the author's personal collection.*

As adult women, my sisters and I learned that coffee also signified health and wellbeing. Too soon after he retired, Dad declined the *gebakjes* offered him and Ensure replaced his coffee. Yet 25 years after my father's death, when we're together as siblings, one of us will occasionally take an exaggerated slurp of coffee and give a deep, satisfied sigh, just as my father used to do, and say, "Ah, Sjoukje, what is that a *lekker kop koffie!*"

When relatives from Holland came to visit in Calgary a few years ago, they brought with them a package of *Douwe Egberts* coffee – in case their Canadian cousins didn't have good coffee to drink. And mid-morning throughout their trip we stopped to have a *gezellig bakje koffie* together. So, how could Brent have known that the backdrop to my persistent offer of coffee on that cold winter day came from such an embedded cultural tradition?

Last summer, Frances and I received an invitation to visit old family friends, people who'd immigrated to Canada a year or two before our parents did. Years ago, when visiting with my parents, Mr. Wagenaar argued with my father about matters of faith, and with her more even disposition, Mrs. Wagenaar would have cooled their fevered disagreements.

On this particular Sunday, Frances and I arrived at their door, soon after the Wagenaars had arrived home from church. The smell of coffee greeted us as we shook hands and gave each other a hug. They had aged and were faltering in their movements, but they remained as *hartelijk*, welcoming, as ever. After being seated in the living room, I glanced about at the Delft blue wall tiles, the lacy white Dutch valances over each window, the plants on the windowsill. Their home still retained all of its Dutch *gezelligheid*.

Mrs. Wagenaar brought us each our coffee, a little *lepelje* resting in the saucer. We declined the cream and "shu-kar", as she pronounced it, but we accepted the cake topped with whipping cream and strawberries. We talked about my parents, both gone now. We asked about their children and grandchildren, spoke about our jobs, their retirement, as well as about Dutch people, living and deceased, we both knew. With our second cup of coffee, Mr. Wagenaar pointed to a plate of goodies on the coffee table complete with *speculaas* cookies and store-bought *koek*.

And even though my sister and I are middle-aged women, and just as in years gone by, he said to us, "You girls help yourselves; don't be shy."

It was all I could do not to take a noisy drink from my coffee and say with deep satisfaction, "*Hè*, what is this *gezellig* to be together like this!"

### About the author

Twenty years ago, Jenny Radsmá moved south from northwestern Alberta to live in northern Maine where meeting people with a Dutch accent is a rarity. The daughter of immigrant parents (her father from Haarlem, her mother from Lemmer), who by needs ended their formal education midway through the eighth grade, Jenny made her parents proud by becoming "Dr." Radsmá. A professor of nursing by day, she writes when she can, mostly on weekends. She continues to take writing workshops and her work, primarily about the Dutch immigrant experience within her own family, has been published in *Goose River Anthology*, *Echoes*, and *The Sun*. When Jenny is not teaching, reading, or writing, she bikes, hikes, cross country skies, or snowshoes, depending on the weather. She still has hopes of learning to speak fluent Dutch and Frisian.

Author's contact: radsmá@maine.edu

### **Qu'y a-t-il dans une tasse de café?**

Chez eux ou à l'étranger, les Néerlandais, quelle que soit leur position politique ou religieuse, ont toujours pratiqué une culture puissante centrée sur la *gezelligheid*. Mes parents, qui ont émigré des Pays-Bas, et leur cercle d'amis néerlandais ont pareillement respecté l'importance de la *koffietijd*, l'heure du café. Dans les années après la guerre, une tasse de café fraîchement préparée représentait tant de choses : l'abondance, la liberté, l'absence de pénurie. Une tasse de café offrait une pause dans la routine quotidienne, apportant un confort et une détente momentanés – un rappel que, du moins pour l'instant, tout allait bien. Une *gezellige kop koffie* comportait aussi une attente puissante du partage – avec la famille, les amis, de nouveaux venus. Ne pas offrir aux autres l'hospitalité d'une tasse de café corsé, c'était *ongezellig* et même mal élevé. Dans le présent essai, la fille née au Canada de parents immigrés raconte le rôle central de la *koffietijd* pendant ses années de formation, et comment son rôle dans sa vie a persisté longtemps après qu'elle s'était éloignée d'une communauté de Néerlandais et de leur coutume de *gezellig samen een lekker kopje koffie drinken*.

### **Wat zit er in die koffie?**

Zowel thuis als in het buitenland houden Nederlanders stevig vast aan een ingebakken cultuur van gezelligheid, ongeacht tot welke politieke of religieuze stroming ze behoren. Dit gold ook voor mijn ouders en hun kring van Nederlandse vrienden die vanuit Nederland naar Canada emigreerden, en het fenomeen “koffietijd” vormde er een belangrijk onderdeel van. In de na-oorlogse jaren stond een versgezette kop koffie voor zoveel meer: overvloed, vrijheid, het ontbreken van tekort. Een kopje koffie bood een pauze in de dagelijkse routine en een moment van rust en ontspanning – het besef dat, voor dit moment ten minste, alles in orde was. Een gezellig kopje koffie gaf uitdrukking aan een krachtig gevoel van samenzijn en delen – met familie, vrienden en nieuwkomers. Elkaar niet een lekker kopje koffie aanbieden was “ongezellig”, zelfs slecht-gemanierd. In dit essay kijkt een in Canada geboren dochter van Nederlandse immigranten terug op de centrale rol die de koffietijd speelde in haar jeugd, een rol die nog doorspeelde in haar leven lang nadat ze was vertrokken uit de gemeenschap van Nederlanders met hun gewoonte van “gezellig samen een lekker kopje koffie drinken.”