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The Netherlands: Among Friends in Foreign Parts (1983)

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2. THE NETHERLANDS

October 1983, The Netherlands (Journal, copy to Dad)—Came here Wednesday morning October 19. KLM flight out of JFK, departed 7 p.m. Tuesday, arriving seven hours later in Schiphol, Amsterdam's Airport, local time 6:45 a.m. Able to grab, say, 90 minutes sleep on board. Business class, no one next to me so it wasn't too bad. But right off the bat in JFK I knew I was entering another world. The hospitality center at Kennedy was Dutch, foreign language newspapers all over; strong coffee, people who were hosts who had a decidedly Teutonic accent. The women looked healthy, not unlike those from the American Midwest. Same sturdy look, healthy, hale; no b.s. about them.

It was a night flight. I read the magazine *Holland Herald*, the KLM house organ. Straight PR stuff. But the mention of Europe and its markets, products and ways of doing business was unmistakably different from anything I was used to. A world is going on out there I had not thought of. Now I entered foreign territory; a New Worlder going back to the Old World.

Only a week before Sun Oak and I had watched an excellent PBS series about Swedes who immigrated to the Minnesota in the mid-19th century. Their voyage was horrible. Ten weeks in danger and filth, with disease, boredom, emotional trauma as old connections were broken to be replaced with new ones no one could possibly know. Here I was now, seated in the business class of KLM's flight to Amsterdam, a seven-hour trip, the representative of a New World multinational. Something fundamental seemed to be going on.

I am seeing something new: the way Americans dominate the world these days. In the hotel here are Texans. They are no doubt with oil & gas. Then there are the other Americans with other companies; the guy from Utah who spoke with his family from the lounge. He looked like a drilling supervisor,

and no doubt was, with Zapata, Dixilyn Field, Sedco or whichever. And then there was me, the Mobil guy coming to write some words about the new offshore gas producing operation on Block P-6. These words written in English will be translated into Dutch so they can be printed in letters, pamphlets, news articles, speeches and ads to be seen by Dutch citizens and civil servants in government ministries that this U.S. outfit is here to do business with. Yes, we are in backyard of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group of Companies, but we mean no harm; only commerce. I leave unwritten that the Dutch government had approved Mobil's offshore lease on P-6 in part to assure the world that it is not working only in Shell's interest, and that Mobil will leverage this idea for more acreage and concessions later.

I have now become comfortable with assignments of this kind, since it is standard stuff and must be done if the corporation is to get relationships going. I am here to pursue the purpose of image creation and am aware of the craft, and also aware that others came before—German, Spanish, French and English. Now is the Americans' turn. I'd like to think we are benign visitors and not like some earlier conquerors, but it is a type of conquest nonetheless—of commerce, of culture. American products and culture permeate the Dutch culture now. Blue jeans everywhere; music manufactured by bands and record companies imitating American pop. Shops sell similar products: Pepsi, Coke, McDonald's, Samsonite, Kodak, Esso, and Mobil. The hotels are completely multi-national; the Hotel Babylon in Den Haag, where I'm staying, could be a mid market joint in Topeka, Omaha, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Chicago or Stamford.

There are differences: The style of clothing worn by teenagers is a more pronounced punk style—tattoos, pins, torn dress, and boots, the equivalent of cowboy boots. In Scheveningen, the Dutch equivalent of Coney Island/Atlantic City/Marblehead/Martha's Vineyard, Dutch kids sport western sheepskin coats and Stetson hats. Confederate flags were stitched into jeans jackets. Offshore, when I was in the Dutch North Sea aboard the U.K. Land & Marine Ltd. accommodation platform jacked-up offshore next to the Mobil P-6 platform under construction, a Brit working as a steward had a rebel flag tattooed on his neck just above the collar line. Nice guy, too. This lad had the visage of Ichabod Crane: sharp nose, long neck and no chin.

Back onshore in town there was spray-can graffiti around. Not so much as in New York, but enough to give you pause. The anti-nuke crowds handed out buttons and fliers and gathered money for the monster anti-nuke rally scheduled for October 29 in Den Haag and in Delft, where I visited. Delft is world famous for its blue chinaware, but this week the people were pushing anti-Reagan propaganda from pushcarts. The nearby men and women were dressed in jeans, sweaters and peacoats. The fashionable here seem to have adopted the look of having just gotten out of bed. Men sport

day-old growths of beards, and hair is not so neatly combed, having the look of having been slept in and not washed for a day or two. In the U.S. this is the studied grubbiness of students; but many Dutch in the under-35 crowd looked this way.

Smoking as well. There doesn't seem to be the social stigma attached to smoothing here that there is in the U.S. Also, Marlboros, Winstons, and Camels are popular. The Dutch favor mixing rough cut tobacco from a pipe tobacco pouch and rolling single cigarettes. There is a product now called Kansas, showing a Dutchman in his 30s, in an office and with several days of growth on his face, corduroy coat and knit tie, with a pipe tobacco pouch in front of him with the word "Kansas" on it in the graphic style similar to Winston at home, and three pictures of him rolling a cigarette. "How to roll your own American" is the legend.

The Dutch have another legacy: racial minorities. There was the Dutch East India Company, and the Dutch West India Company, which in the 16th and 17th centuries were quite the deal. The Dutch led the world for a period between 1600 and 1700, colonizing and using ship commerce to their advantage (like the Portuguese in the 15th century). They weren't able to keep North America, the Brits being much better there. New York was first New Amsterdam and despite the name change never left behind the commercial habits set up there by the trading Dutch. Connecticut was first sighted by the Dutch explorer Adraean Block (as in Block Island). The first settlement in Connecticut was Suckiage (House of Good Hope) before Rev. Thomas Hooker's company showed up to rename it Hartford. Tappan Zee, Staten Island, Flushing, Brooklyn, Bronx, Arthur Kill, Kill von Kull, Roosevelt, and Hudson River patron system were all Dutch in origin. To say nothing of South Africa. The Dutch didn't export there as well. But they held on in Indonesia, called the Dutch East Indies, until the 1950s, and in the Netherlands Antilles in the Caribbean.

In today's Netherlands are many ex-pats from those colonies. When Sukarno took over Indonesia in 1958 he told all natives with Dutch citizenship to get out. They are now in the Netherlands, doing well, as Dutch as the Dutch, if with somewhat darker complexions. Other darker-skinned settlers of the African variety do less well. A Dutch reporter I spent a day with say there is increasing racial tension and no solution in sight.

The Dutch have a conflicted soul: at once pagan and pious. Pornography is sold openly without a blush. Sex seems to be a natural thing, which of course it is, but lust for sale is at the furthest end of the scale here. What arouses here would be on the fringes of madness. The society has two religious traditions: Dutch Reformed and Roman Catholic. The Catholic, I would guess, is the more liberal. Reformed is the label left over from the Reformation when the Protestant revolutionaries of the Northern European

tribes imposed a harsh and strict catechism to replace the Roman rites. Lutheranism, despite the need for its liberalizing origins, also eventually brought repressive dogmatism and a state-established religion that stifled dissent. But Holland was still a haven for victims of religious persecution: the fundamentalist Puritans from England we call Pilgrims; the Jews banished from Spain during the Inquisition; during WW2 many Dutch hid Jews from the Nazis. Anne Frank lived in Amsterdam, hidden by a sympathetic Dutch family. Her home today is a museum.

WW2 remains living memory for half the population. Rotterdam, Den Haag, Arnheim were all leveled during the war. The Germans occupied Holland for four years. Most of the Jews in Holland were captured, and most of those were killed. Americans are well thought of here. The father of Bert Betlam, the relations manager for the E&P affiliate, Mobil Producing Netherlands, Inc., was a Jew who survived Auschwitz. Betlam said, "We are grateful to Americans for the liberation," while explaining the origins of the anti-nuke crowd we kept seeing and that they were not anti-American. "We want to say that we are speaking to you as friends..." He went on to explain that the Communists were only a fraction of those opposed to the planned installation of nuclear warheads on Pershing II and cruise missiles in Germany and Italy. "...Most are morally opposed to these weapons."

The phrase "liberating us" struck me. Is this how the older people of Holland feel? Liberated? But in popular Dutch culture today, Americans are rich, wear fancy clothing, have stylish music, tobacco, big automobiles, and money. At one point, I pulled out my money clip to pay for a lunch, showing greenbacks and guilders. I thought nothing of it. But my companions felt compelled to make a joke: "Ah, the rich American." In the stores, shopkeepers spoke English to me. My belt buckle, with Mobil and the Pegasus on it, gave me away; or my shoes did: the black jobs with the tassels. I also shaved and showered daily, wore a tie and a blue jacket. I carried a camera and map. I might as well have had the Stars and Stripes painted on my forehead.

Everybody speaks English, it seems. I am embarrassed I don't speak Dutch. Explained one: "We are 90 minutes from Germany in one direction, and Belgium and France in the other. We learn languages in self-defense."

But Americans expect everybody to speak English; or rather I do. I wear a tie clasp that has on it a ball bearing, a promotional giveaway from New Departure, the GM unit Dad worked in between 1940 and 1958, before the transfer to Delco. New Departure manufactured the ball bearings used in the allied war machinery: tanks, planes, ships and bombsights used in the B-52 raids. Dad worked with the War Department to target the Nazi ball bearing works in Schweinfurt, Germany. The argument was: knock out the bearings and the Nazi war machines would grind to a halt. Half the 600 B-52s sent on one raid over Schweinfurt were lost.

The allies won the war and it shows. The culture I walked through is dominated by manufacturers and marketers from America. I try to be polite, but I have the aroma of victory about me. The Dutch, though obviously Dutch, adopt the American veneer. The shopping centers have video games from the U.S. *Time* magazine is sold; along with the comparatively tame, by local standards, *Playboy* and *Penthouse* skin mags. The shirts have alligator logos and the jeans, Levis and Lee labels. I heard American rock 'n' roll through the public address system at the Centrum's shopping center in Den Haag.

On page one of the *Wall Street Journal* (International Edition) published Wednesday was a story about European teenagers and under-30s who resent America, NATO and the Western alliance. The Pershing II/cruise missile issue has poured gasoline on these smoldering embers of liberated European resentment. They say they think Americans are bullies. They don't accept the premise for the NATO alliance. All they see is that their homelands would be the front lines in any confrontation between the WW2 victors: the U.S. and USSR. Would the U.S. risk Kansas City or New York for Paris or Hamburg? Where would the first missiles fall?

On the cover of *Time* this week is a picture of a British punk rocker, his hair glued into spikes, with red-dyed Mohawk, earrings, nose loops, his skin pasty and blemished. The Tribes of Britain, the headline reads. It is a trendy essay about the gangs of UK youth who have rejected established society to create their own mini-cultures, complex, nihilistic, vacant and a social safety value. But these so-called tribes are symptoms of a disease. Lack of opportunity in the UK, a rigid class system where working class are likely to remain so, particularly now with the worldwide industrial downturn, industrial unemployment pegged to 15 percent or so for a generation. How can a society broken up into nihilistic tribes survive as a partner in the Western alliance? Is there glory left in the UK's future? Will that society produce the kind of leaders who will be able to make the decisions necessary to carry the NATO alliance forward, intact until economic growth has come to bring the benefits the members of those tribes wish they had?

Is there a future in all this? What forces are at work in the world to remedy this problem? American multinationals. Are Mobil and the other Western capitalist/investors from the U.S. the ones who can bring prosperity? I hope so. How different victors behave in 1983. The goal, the benefits of commerce, are the same. I only hope the victors don't insist on loyalty to a political or religious cause as well. The weakness in the confrontation with the USSR, the collectivist imperialists, the men who fear freedom at the individual and private individuals' organizations (corporations) as if they were a plague. They are many in Europe, nurtured in the statist tradition which want some central power to lead, who apparently have decided that the risk of nuclear annihilation is not worth freedom; communism or Soviet

appeasement is better than resistance to tyranny. Resistance is too risky. The challenge to my generation in the U.S. to bring about economic growth so that the liberty gained by WW2 does not get crushed by the fear of war or lack of economic opportunity.



Being out of the country was an eye opener, a bath in new water with clean soap, cleaning off all the gunk. I've come back refreshed, happier than a clam in rich silt and mud that I am American, live here, have a good job with a world-class outfit and have an outlook on the world that isn't like that of the Europeans, who are tired, weary, cynical and seemingly incapable of acting to change their lives and future.

The Netherlands is a strange place; only 14 million people on land the size of Connecticut and Massachusetts. Every inch of space is used for some utilitarian purpose. Much of the country is below sea level—polderland, they call it. The topography is dunes and ridges along the North Sea, and as you go inland, swamps and marshes that have been diked and pumped dry for agriculture. The land then elevates to foothills leading to Belgium, Luxembourg, and West Germany.

The chief characteristic of Holland is the fact that the land is marshland, reclaimed by the people. The Celtic tribes that were there were able to survive between the Teutonic tribes of Germany and the Frankish tribes of France to the west. The reason they did was because they lived in swamp land. No Teutonic or Frankish military could figure out how to invade and keep control. They kept getting stuck in the mud.

In the Middle Ages, the Dutch figured out how to dike land and use canals and windmills to control the water. At various times, Spain, France and the Teutonic tribes were influential. The Reformation ripped the place apart. Catholics stayed in the south and west near France, the Lutherans near Germany to the north and east. The Reformation in Holland created the Dutch Reformed Church, which is strict, puritan and stern. It fits the national character, which is hard, work-oriented, stubborn and fiercely independent. This character was necessary to survive the river and tidal flooding that came predictably and often to ruin the countryside, only to have the Dutch reclaim the land again, over and over. They stuck with it.

The familiarity with water led to commerce, trading elsewhere and a kind of cosmopolitan strain that led to a tolerance that invited plenty of refugees from other European cities. The principles of trade are paramount, near sacred, there. You can do business in Holland. Amsterdam and Rotterdam became huge trading ports. Today Rotterdam is the largest port in the world. Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport is the gateway to Europe.

In the 17th century, the Dutch East India and Dutch West India com-

panies led to the exploration of the world. Adraean Block, a Dutch navigator, was the first European to explore the Connecticut River valley in 1607. New York was originally New Amsterdam. Staten Island, Flushing, Brooklyn, Bronx are all Dutch names. Roosevelt was a Dutch name.

The English and Dutch fought three wars in the 17th century and the Dutch lost North America. But they held onto some islands in the Caribbean and in Asia. Indonesia was a Dutch colony for three centuries, until the 1950s. Indonesians, who do a lot of business with Mobil, I'm learning, think of the Netherlands the way Americans think about England. Today Holland is home to some 400,000 ex-Indonesians who were thrown out of Indonesia in the revolution in 1957-58. They are integrated into the Netherlands and, like the Normans in Ireland, are more Dutch than the Dutch themselves.

There is a control about the place. There is the weight of history, too. You see buildings and such that have meaning back well into the Middle Ages. I visited a town called Delft, an old canal city with a Nieuwe Kerk (New Church) built in the 16th century! It housed the tombs of the House of Orange, the original Dutch royal family. Recall that the Protestant William of Orange (William III) was called on by English nobles to take over the English throne in 1689 and toss out the Catholic James II, the brother of William's wife, Mary. The English didn't want James the Catholic to be head of the country anymore. The result was the war of the kings, in Ireland, and the Battle of the Boyne. King Billy beat King James. It cemented English Protestant rule, the Orange Order in Ireland, and led to the subjugation of the Irish Catholics. It is woven into the history of Ireland tightly.

In Delft are the Orange family plots. William's ancestor, William the Silent (William I) in 1580 or so led the Dutch in revolt against the rule of Catholic Spain. He is the George Washington of Holland. He was murdered in 1584 by a "Catholic fanatic," say the local tour guides. I learned all this walking through the garden grounds in Delft. It is a tourist spot today, quite lovely. Gothic, yet plain, simple beauty of Middle Ages architecture, heavy stone. It gave me the feeling of a thick bowl of hearty pea soup. Not fancy, but real nourishing.



It was in a small restaurant near Mobil Oil b.v.'s building at Westblaak 163, Rotterdam, October 24, 1983, that the British relations manager, Brian Rowell, a dour ex-pat long since left behind in the corporate scramble, said: "You haven't heard then, have you?"

"What?"

Rowell quickly told me about the Marines in Beirut. Some 130 of them killed by an Islamic nut. Bing bang. In an instant I wanted to go home; and

I wanted the U.S. to air strike those sons of bitches. Revenge. Rowell and I mumbled through more literate reactions: the implications of the attack, would it lead to escalation, an attack of Syria, the Russians. What about the allies there—the French, Brits and Italians? U.S. Marines weren't the only nationals murdered there.

I spent the rest of the afternoon with the MObv people, but it was all blurry and I don't recall much except the rush of notions and emotions. About how my sister, Tara, for example had been in India on November 22, 1963, when she heard about President Kennedy's murder and had wanted to go home that day; I felt the same thing now, 20 years later, with the Marines. I belonged at home, not Rotterdam. The world was suddenly more dangerous. The *Herald-Tribune*, published in Paris, and the *Wall Street Journal* Europe Edition were full of the news about Beirut. The headlines told of the events to the south in the former French protectorate, Lebanon, as close to a nonexistent nation as any on earth now.

Rotterdam itself has the drab look of Eastern Europe, or at least my idea of Eastern Europe. It is an ugly town, actually, in the sense that there was an absence of beauty to all I saw. It is drab with the look of having been hastily built after WW2; the streets were cobblestone, with streetcar rails imbedded in the brick work. The buildings, however, are of a uniform utility, a form that follows only function and the limits of materials available. Despite this lack of beauty, the town does have a hidden vitality. It is the largest port in the world; surpassing New York City and London, after all; and the industrial heart of Northern Europe, manufacturing materials for western France, Germany, Belgium and of course the Netherlands.

Yet it is ugly, like a Pittsburgh without the charm of the rivers and hills, before its cleanup. The sky was overcast; the chill of fall in the air. Discarded papers blew about the dirty gray sidewalks. In the Rotterdam Central Station (or Centrum) were hangers-about of a world-class, drug drifters of nondescript ethnic origins, except they were scruffy, swarthy and mean looking. The station looked as if it was designed by the same people who build schools in the U.S. for districts that don't have money. The decorative colors were dull, pale, unattractive shades of orange and blue. And the flotsam and jetsam of Europe, bums by U.S. standards, drug users/peddlers, merchants of no-good, hung about. It stuck out like a dandy at Joliet prison. For some reason, I was too uneasy during my wait for the train back to Den Haag.

I read and reread all the news columns. Later at the hotel I called home and with the marvel of technology spoke with Sun Oak and the kids as though they were on the next block. Hearing their voices was the tonic I needed.

At the airport the next day were guards with weapons drawn, reacting to the terrorism. The Reijkspolice, who held grease guns, moved about in

armored cars, had sidearms as well as carbines nearby. The passengers waiting to depart came from all over the world, Arabia, Israel, Turkey, Asia and the Americas. It was a cacophony of humanity, and it was confusing. Arab women with face-covering garb. Not 50 feet from me was a woman seated between her husband and daughter, wearing a black sheet over her entire body. I am sure there is a logic to it, but the point is that the world is full of people with ideas like that. And others who think nothing of driving a truck with 2,000 pounds of dynamite into a compound containing several hundred people and igniting a charge to blow them, the building, and themselves up.

The longer I sat in the airport, hearing this strange symphony of language that didn't make sense, seeing people who know nothing of Western Reserve, 42nd Street, Stamford, Antietam, my family on Skyline Lane, the more anxious I got. Get home! Leave behind in Europe the Europeans, the anti-nukers, the conflicts of cultures, tribes, myths, religions and language. I wanted the sanctuary of the United States.



The KLM flight home was filled with Europeans going to the U.S. on business or holiday. I was one of the few Americans aboard.

When we got off, I had one of the best moments of my life. I was tired, five hours time difference and a seven-hour flight. I had left at 2 p.m. and was landing at 4:30 p.m. that same afternoon. JFK Airport Terminal is a swirling mass of foreigners alighting from planes that reach around the globe, a modern bloodstream bringing different people together. The JFK Airport in Queens is the collection point.

The races of people there are a cross section of the world. South Asians, Arabs, East Asians, Europeans. Rich and poor. Mediterraneans carried their belongings in paper boxes held together with worn cords. Entire families were huddled together, grandparents to grandchildren. Young men, the able generation, had concerned looks on their faces, wondering what it all meant coming to the U.S.

We wound our way out of the Boeing 747 into a corridor of movable gangways, down sterile corridors made of cinder blocks and painted in cream tones with blue and red stripes. We walked through metal detectors, passport checks. The customs and immigration civil servants who directed this pedestrian traffic were for the most part black, many with accents from the Caribbean.

This was the world coming to America. There was an Irish flight Aer Lingus which arrived with us and Irishers were mixed in with the Europeans. Then I rounded a corner and saw three rows segregated together along a long corridor leading to the some large red doors.

The row against the wall was jammed with people from the KLM flight,

holding their luggage and waiting for clearance to get in. I wondered whether this would be a line I would have to wait in. I thought that I was like all the others, even though I was arriving in my own country.

As I rounded the corner the customs agent called out: “Passengers with American passports, American citizens take the center aisle.”

There was not a soul in the center aisle. I turned the corner and walked down the center aisle, past all the others, holding my carry-on suitcase, and looked over at the faces of my fellow travelers. I was moving along and they were standing still. There was a clear corridor in front of me and I was approaching those red doors without an impediment in sight. So help me, when I opened those doors and crossed that threshold, unencumbered, it was one of the grateful moments of my life.