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**Dutch Immigration to Canada after World War II**  
**in Manja Beukman's**  
*Ik was de Bruid van een Canadees*<sup>1</sup>

The liberation of one's country from an occupying force is an experience that must be difficult to understand for anyone who has not lived through it. Our generation wishes to relate to the older generations' memories, whether they may be real or imagined. And the social upheaval and broken lives caused by wars in turn produced profound cultural changes and large emigrations, like the one following World War II.

*Ik was de Bruid van een Canadees* by Manja Beukman, published in Amsterdam in 1950 by De Bezige Bij, is particularly interesting in that, although it was a highly successful novel at the time, both in the Netherlands and in *émigré* circles in Canada, it was soon forgotten. Today, not even the Library of Congress has a copy, although it does have a copy of her other novel about cultural shock of a different sort, entitled *De Baby was 40* (1951).

Manja Beukman describes the joys that are associated with the freedom of finally overcoming the occupation of the Netherlands during the Second World War, when people were deprived of basic human needs such as shelter, food and liberty. At the same time, she evokes a universal

experience of a young woman and a young man discovering their sexuality.

Imagine a young Canadian soldier from Northern Ontario – a giant of a man, with muscles like Popeye's and the accompanying pea-brain, who proposes to a young Dutch lady. She, Elisabeth van der Werf, does not love Lloyd, but she is physically attracted to him and he embodies the Canadian man, portrayed in the pre-World War II era in films with a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer as hero (such as *Rosemarie*, starring Nelson Eddy and Jeannette MacDonald), so she decides to accept his proposal. Little does she realize that Lloyd, as an honourable Canadian, feels that he must propose to her because they have made love.

Elisabeth's expectations of her life in Canada are not fulfilled. She loves the cars and other material comforts, and the wilderness and cabins in the Northern Ontario bush, but misses the "culture" of the Old World. Soon she realizes that she has made the wrong decision, as has her fiancé, by promising to marry her, and she escapes from Lloyd's railway town in the northern bush to the city, to find the social and cultural life that she believed existed in the

Netherlands.

Since she is an emancipated woman, she does not blame anyone for her plight, refuses to admit to her relatives that she has made the wrong decision, takes on many menial jobs and lives in poverty, until she finds a partner who fulfills all of her expectations of what a man should be.

The original Dutch novel is almost impossible to obtain, but fortunately some of the reviews by Dutch newspapers of the day have survived.<sup>2</sup> Post-war Dutch readers applauded not only Ms. Beukman's skillful rendering of the cultural shock faced in Canada by her fictitious war bride Elisabeth, but also her humorous depiction of Elisabeth's gradual enlightenment and maturing when challenged to face the new cultural realities brought about by the war:

From *De Telegraaf*, June 29, 1950:

“Ik was de Bruid van een Canadees”  
EEN BOEK VOL SPOT  
EN ZELFSPOT

Dit is het verhaal van Elisabeth uit Amsterdam. Die op het “gym” is geweest en nu 32 is en geen man meer denkt te zullen krijgen en “yes” zegt wanneer haar Canadaees (“Als je nu nog met een officier aankwam!”) haar stuntelig vraagt: “Will you marry me, sweety?” Lloyd Collis heet Elisabeth's

Canadees en wanneer ze hem vraagt: “Is Italië mooie?” dan zegt hij: “Ze hebben er luizen.”

Een reus in khaki, die er na twee jaar wachten, bij haar aankomst te New York, in zijn net donkerblauwe colbert blijkt uit te zien als een bokser op zijn Zondags...

... En altijd Coca Cola, altijd en overal Coca Cola en altijd en overal prentbriefkaarten voor thuis, en plumpe souvenir-asbakken met “New York” er op...

... Lloyd Collis, spoorwegman uit een spoorwegdorp, waar men de gehele dag slaapt. En tot niets komt. Waar een dikke muur om de menselijke geest staat met slechts een paar luikjes er in: een eten-en-drinken-luikje, een baseball luikje, een wat-doen-de-buren-luikje.

The reviewer concluded:

“Ik was de Bruid van een Canadees” ... is een boek geworden van een ironische oprechtheid, die zeldzaam is in onze romanliteratuur. Het is ons niet bekend, of deze Manja Beukman al meer schreef, maar eerlijk gezegd, doet ons dat een beetje onverschillig, omdat we haar dankbaar zijn voor die verrukkelijke zoetzure mengseldranken van spot en zelfspot, van doodegewone

dappere menselijkheid, in een roman, die op geen enkele bladzijde een bordje met het vetgeschilderde woord "Literatuur" er op wil dragen. En het daardoor toch wel een beetje is geworden.

These thoughts are closely paralleled in *De Courant*, August 22, 1950:

Een buitengewoon boeiende en interessante roman van een Hollands meisje, dat als oorlogsbruidje naar Canada reist.

Elisabeth van der Werf is een intelligente gymnasiaste, uit een rijke, degelijke Hollandse familie, die na een paar mislukte verlovingen, denkt "over" te zullen blijven en daarom gaat trouwen met een Canadese soldaat...

Met dit alles geeft de schrijfster een zeer duidelijk beeld van het leven in Amerika, zoals dit werkelijk is en stelt daardoor in een bespottelijk daglicht de Hollandse "vakjesgeest", die in Amerika geheel vreemd is.

The balance between cultural shock on the one hand and confrontation followed by acceptance of new cultural realities on the other, is particularly well illustrated by Manja Beukman in the following two vignettes from "The War Bride's Tale." The first depicts the social life, full of complaints and sentimental reminiscence, of what was a typical multi-ethnic émigré colony in post-war Montreal:

The Bersus' friends and acquaintances had all fled from national socialism or communism – Jewish, half-Jewish, or spouses of Jewish immigrants who had had to build a new future in Canada.

There was a woman who had lost her husband, a surgeon, in a concentration camp, and now gave massages in the Turkish bath of a hotel and was ecstatic for every dollar of every tip because her furniture consisted primarily of orange crates.

There was a Czechoslovakian woman who had lost all her belongings because of the communists and with the grand total of fifty dollars had built up a new life in Canada. The loss of their beautiful country house and art collection had so upset her husband that he had become insane three weeks after arriving in Canada.

And then there was a Hungarian actor who worked on the assembly line in a factory.

These friends visited with the Bersus in groups of five, six or even ten at a time. They enjoyed Frau Clementine's Apfelstrudel and coffee – and on special occasions also her stuffed breast of veal and cabbage salad – and filled every corner of the old-fashioned house with their loud, excited Jewish voices, their lamentations, their humour, their deep philosophical speculations and the strange stories of their lives.

Their German had a Hungarian, Czech or other accent,

their manners were courteous and old-fashioned. Here the lost grandeur of better days was upheld. With a dashing gesture, one kissed the hand of the lady with the orange crate furniture. One wore one's last – not yet pawned – diamond ring. One called Clementine: 'Frau Doktor.'

A strange, small, Jewish colony in the middle of this Canadian city. So infinitely remote from comic strips and boxing matches and popcorn and Coca Cola. Some of them full of courage and energy to adapt and build new lives notwithstanding their advancing years. Most of them, however, so deeply rooted in the old ways that adapting was an impossibility and the new country became an everlasting source of irritation. Excited voices that reverberated like the sound of a waterfall there in that little house. Murder. And death. And concentration camps. Gas chambers. Hiding. And former happiness, gone forever.

"Wenn ich doch noch einmal mein eigenes Haus zurücksehen könnte," said the Czech woman. "It was white. Yes, yes, a white house with a magnificent driveway. But no, it's probably better never to see it again. Heaven knows who's living there now...who's sleeping in the bed I was born in..."

"When you get your very first tip," said the wife of the surgeon who had been murdered in the concentration camp, "then an indescribable feeling passes through you. You think: Now I'm going to give this rascal who dares to insult me like this a slap in the face. But

later you become completely numbed. You only think: I hope he gives me a dollar instead of fifty cents, because then I can buy that little desk sooner and get rid of another orange crate... Only the heat and the humidity, Frau Doktor, I don't think you can ever get used to that. So much humidity and heat... And then more heat at home. Why all that stoking of the central heating here? Why must it be so bloody hot in all the houses?"

"Never ask why in this country," said Herrchen. "Why? Because they're idiots. Or aren't they idiots, people who want to wear summer clothes all year long and then in the winter have to wear quilted overcoats as heavy as lead over those summer clothes, and also have to stoke their furnaces until you sweat water and blood?"

"Herr Doktor, they even eat peanut butter mixed with jam here!"

"Peanut butter mixed with jam? Nah, so was! Clementine, hast du gehört? Peanut butter mixed with jam!"

"What do they know about food?" said Frau Clementine. "I wouldn't want to take a bite of it."

"Lemon pie schmeckt doch nicht so schlecht."

"Ach was," said Herrchen. "Lemon pie. So was kann man doch nicht essen!"

"They say there are no class distinctions," said the actor who worked on an assembly line. "That's an overstatement, of course: class distinctions aren't as big here as they are in Europe. But you know why? I'll explain it to you. In a country

where everybody's stupid, where nobody has a blasse Ahnung about art, literature, music, theatre, in such a country everybody can go around with everybody else. Das ist doch klar, nicht wahr? At home a doctor or a teacher wouldn't go around with a ditch digger because he can't talk to him. But if nobody in a country can talk about anything important and moreover if everybody comes from a nothing background, then it's obvious that class distinctions fall away!" (134-136)

Such typical and understandable nostalgia suffered by the new immigrants is counterbalanced by the author's devastating parry in the opposite direction, in which Elisabeth is once again forced to face one of the most odious aspects of the Old World.

There was an advertisement in the *Montreal Star* requiring a Dutch secretary for an official Dutch agency in Canada, and although Elisabeth detested office work, it seemed an extraordinary opportunity she couldn't ignore.

One evening after receiving a reply to her enquiry, she went to the Windsor Hotel where she was to meet two Dutch gentlemen.

They were very Dutch indeed.

They wore sombre three piece suits and conservative ties with narrow stripes. And one of them spoke with the rarefied affectations of The Hague, pronouncing his 'ij' as 'eh,' his 'a' as 'e,' his 'ee' as 'ie' and his 'o' as 'oo'. He was therefore very genteel indeed.

And they were very pompous

too, as could be seen from their handling of the hiring of a new stenographer as if it were a matter of international importance.

When she showed them her letters of reference, the two gentlemen made careful notes in exquisite note pads with their fountain pens.

"I conclude from these references that you possess valued presence," the one gentleman said at last.

"Yes, but one further consideration," said the other, with rarefied affectation. "What does your father do?"

This one little sentence was such typically Dutch narrow-mindedness that she realized fully for the first time just how refreshing and wholesome the simplicity of Canada was.

What does your father do? It wasn't enough that she was a good secretary. One also wanted to know precisely into which social pigeon hole to place her. One didn't want to work under the same roof with someone from the wrong pigeon hole.

If she had now replied: my father is a baker – then this job would have been lost to her forever. Even if she were the best secretary in the world.

One required the proper father – a father who created no anxieties in regard to ancestry.

What does your father do? This was how terribly narrow-minded-Dutch these two gentlemen had remained right in the middle of the New World, where an

Eisenhower had been a cowboy, and a surgeon by the name of Dr. James Harris wasn't in the least embarrassed to tell everyone that he had once been a miner.

She picked up her references from the table, put them in her purse and walked away.

"My father is a ditch digger at sea, second class," she said. "I'm sorry, but I'm not interested in this position any more." (169-170)

Manja Beukman passed away in The Hague on September 18, 1999 at the age of 84. Her novel *De baby was 40* noted above, which is also to some extent autobiographical, dealt with that more traditional kind of culture shock experienced in cross-cultural marriages. After ten years of marriage to a Frenchman from Marseilles, she divorced and returned home to The Hague, where she lived alone for many years.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Translated as *The War Bride's Tale* by Jan W. Auer, St. Catharines: Marnie Heus Books, 1999, with a preface by John Michielsen, Brock University.

<sup>2</sup> The translator is deeply indebted to the author, Manja Beukman, for her generous and good-humoured correspondence in regard to the translation of her novel. It therefore seems appropriate to pass on some of her good-natured commentary from the three dozen or so letters exchanged over a period of three years:

(i) A portion of her reply to the translator's first approach:

Den Haag, 23 april 1996

Geachte Heer Auer,

Hartelijk dank voor Uw aardige en uitgebreide brief. Ik keek er natuurlijk van op dat, na bijna een halve eeuw, iemand mijn boek wil vertalen! Indertijd werd het in het Deens vertaald. Ongeveer in 1951 vroeg de toen bekende schrijver van toneelstukken, Jan Fabricius, me of hij het boek in het Engels mocht vertalen. Hij woonde namelijk in Engeland en had een Engelse vrouw. Hij was erg enthousiast over het boek, min of meer tot m'n verbazing, bekend als hij was.

Hij vond echter de Elisabeth niet "netjes" genoeg en stelde de voorwaarde haar "netjes" te maken. Volgens hem zou dat het Engelse publiek en de mensen uit diversen Engelssprekende landen beter bevallen. Misschien had hij gelijk toen in 1951!??

Ik had er geen zin in want te veel zou er dan veranderen. Dus weg met dat veel en veel grotere afzetgebied. Een eigenwijze tante was ik!...

(ii) A discussion of some items from the translation: the boxers and baseball players pictured on the walls of Lloyd's room had Lombroso faces...

Scheveningen, 17 augustus 1996

Geachte Heer Auer,

Uw brief d.d. 3 aug. en weer een stuk vertaling heb ik in dank ontvangen. Nu Elisabeth in Canada is, dus op Uw terrein, zal ik wel minder opmerkingen hebben, gelukkig! Het ging tot nu toe immers meestal over de na-oorlogse tijd in Nederland die U niet echt bekend kan zijn.

Hier kom ik nog weer even!

bl.74 "Lombroso" ging er van uit, zo als U wel zult weten, dat de vorm van het gelaat, neus, ogen, mond, enz. en de uitdrukking van het gelaat te maken hebben met het karakter. Niemand heeft het nu nog over hem maar in de vooroorlogse jaren waren zijn ideeën nog wel bekend. Een bokser met een Lombroso-gezicht heeft een laag voorhoofd en b.v. sterke kaken...

(iii) Insights into the inspiration for some of the characters in her novels:

Scheveningen, 27 September 1998

Geachte heer Auer,

...Ik vond juni 1999 alleen maar een beetje ver weg, gezien mijn leeftijd en lichamelijke toestand. Of ik er nog ben, is immers de vraag. Daarom beantwoord ik al vast maar een paar van Uw vragen.

Ik ben natuurlijk in Canada geweest, echter niet als "bruid." Ik heb er een jaar mogen werken na eerst gelogeed te hebben bij een Nederlandse vriendin. De meeste mensen uit m'n boeken en verhalen heb ik gekend: soms maar een uurtje, een dag, een week of langer. Ik borduur dan verder aan hun persoonlijkheid, laat weg wat er niet toe doet, verzin er bij wat me passend lijkt...

Soms verzin ik iemand helemaal! Thomas b.v. heb ik 100% verzonnen. Ik ben zelf voor een groot deel Thomas met betrekking tot z'n denkbeelden.

De Russische barones is een Amsterdamse tante van mij die met Rusland niets te maken had...

(iv) A segment from Manja Beukman's last letter to the translator:

Scheveningen, 5 juni 1999

Geachte Heer Auer,

Het was bijzonder leuk de boeken in het Engels te ontvangen en ik kan U niet genoeg danken voor al Uw moeite en enorm doorzettingsvermogen...

Vindt U het een gek ideetje van mij als U een boek in het Engels stuurt naar een

filmmaatchappij in Canada? Ik denk hierbij aan de toneelschrijver Jan Fabricius die de diverse personages leuk vond voor een film...

Hartelijke groet, viel succes verder,  
Manja Beukman