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Maxine Brandis: *Land voor onze zonen: Belevenissen van een emigrante in Canada*

This text has an interesting history, in that it was originally published – in English – by Hurst and Blackett in London, England. The text became available in the Netherlands in a Prisma edition (1960) which was published in cooperation with the Intergovernmental Commission for European Migration in Geneva and the Dutch Emigration Service in the Hague. Obviously, this commission saw particular merit in Maxine Brandis' report in view of the large waves of migration from the Netherlands and elsewhere to other parts of the world.

Maxine Brandis was no stranger to the new world, since she sojourned on several occasions in the United States before the Second World War. Bill Brandis became a reserve officer in active service at the outbreak of the war, and was a prisoner of war for a long time. Approximately one year after the end of the war the Brandis family, by then consisting of three children, emigrated to Canada.

The decision to leave the Netherlands was the result of what can be described as a kind of post-war trauma, familiar to many emigrants from the late 1940s and early 1950s. Lack of opportunity, a general malaise at the end of the war, and especially a feeling that the children would have greater possibilities away from what suddenly appeared to be a tired and spent country – these are some of the reasons cited by Brandis. The family's decision to emigrate to Canada appears to have been taken because the move was easier to organize than one to the US. In addition, however, the Brandis, and especially Maxine, had a very personal reason to consider Canada as their new homeland. Because of the liberation of Holland by the Canadians the Brandis felt that there was a special debt to be repaid. Canadian soldiers came to the rescue of the Brandis family at a specific and crucial moment, and the feeling was that, apart from the fact that it might provide better opportunities for a new start, Canada, being a new country, also needed people like the Brandis in order to realize its full potential. This is a motif one does not often find in Canadian immigrant literature: the sense that one has a personal contribution to make to the new homeland, and that the task of building a new country can be shared among outsiders and natives, each with their own special skills, energy and experience, is relatively rare.

Such admirably optimistic thoughts had to sustain the family in its experience of culture shock and initial hardship, the

depiction of which takes up much of the first half of the book. Brandis gives an accurate and detailed account of the family's journey, and its first impressions of the new homeland, a mixture of anticipation, excitement and bewilderment, with some very fine descriptions of the savage beauty of British Columbia and the intimidating presence of a landscape which clearly struck the family as exotic in the extreme. Crucial was the decision not to remain in Vancouver and to find work with previous Dutch immigrants. The independence of spirit which Maxine shows throughout the text, and which gives it considerable interest apart from the immigrant thematic, is already shown at this early stage. Rather than become dependent on others, and perhaps embrace a relatively easy life, the Brandis decide to risk it in the wild interior of the province, where hardship, but also the rewards of achievement, await them.

In reading about the experiences which follow, it is imperative to stress the importance of the audience in the shaping of the text. We must remember that the book was written for an English audience, and only later for a Dutch one. The unfamiliarity of the reader with Canada is therefore a given. Canada is an "exotic" country, at that time not as easily reached by plane as today. Going to Canada meant a sea-journey as well as a long overland trek by train or bus. The "foreignness" of Canada is in fact even to Maxine only slightly mitigated by her previous experience in the United States, and her own culture shock is conveyed carefully (but in terms of unusual fairness) in anticipation of her audience's own sense of "depaysement."

Canada is indeed presented throughout as a rugged, new, young, pioneering country, and this aspect of Canada is reinforced by the special nature of this case: not the more familiar emigrant experience of the settled East, nor that of the farming communities of the prairies is depicted, but the relatively more rare experience of settling in the bush. British Columbia was not a preferred destination for immigrants from the Netherlands. Even for most Canadians, this part of the country is sufficiently far away to hold some interest, especially also since the family's stay in British Columbia coincides with some major developments in the province, such as the hydro-electric dam at Kitimat and the development of the aluminum industry there.

Because of the unfamiliarity with the country, and also because the targeted readership in either England or Holland is most likely not involved in agricultural activities, there are extended passages dealing with settlement, farming, building a shelter, starting a business and problems of transportation (horse and buggy, later truck and car, also lack of trains, planes etc.) Large parts of the text are also given over to the first attempts at integration in the small B.C. community. Much of this would be familiar to many readers of this journal, but some of it is unique to the Brandis' case. What ultimately brings these emigrant experiences to life, however, is the unusual gift which Maxine Brandis brings to this task. Hers is a very personal style, with many anecdotes and humorous incidents alternating with some more harrowing experiences such as accidents in the bush and the crash of a light plane carrying passengers to the far north. In the course of her story, the writer manages to introduce all the members of her family, their pets, their hobbies, many of the neighbours, both Dutch and Canadian, and to relate some of

the more interesting experiences of her children.

There are also extended passages describing the landscape, the rugged mountain country on the Skeena river, and while the country's beauty is emphasized, there is also an awareness of its dangers, such as snowstorms and floods, especially important for someone involved in an agricultural enterprise. Special things are noted such as the hot springs in the vicinity, and there are rather wry and ironic depictions of the town, whose lack of sidewalks and omnipresence of telephone poles are commented upon. Especially in the early years of the family's life in the town, there appear to be few amenities like banks, post offices and restaurants. Fortunately, such descriptions are generally free from the usual negative comments which newcomers to these territories feel free to dispense. In comparison with Holland, of course, this part of the world strikes the family as rather primitive, but it is to Maxine Brandis' credit that she emphasizes opportunity over tradition, and throughout insists on the helpfulness and welcoming attitude of Canadians. Maxine herself admits that in writing back to her family and friends in Holland she has a tendency to present things in too positive a light — a tendency one can readily understand. Only once, when anticipating a visit from her mother, does she see the town more critically, as she fears that her mother will disapprove of the environment. As it turns out, Maxine's mother enjoys her stay.

Brandis meets challenges of a more "primitive" lifestyle with good humour, energy and courage. She is strengthened in her resolve because she continues to see Canada as a land of opportunity, especially for the children; it is also, she comes to believe, a country which fosters independence in children. In fact, at one point she expresses some concern that later emigrants will find things too easy and will miss out on the kind of character building which is so crucial for adults and children alike. And indeed, when she and her husband Bill find that they are on secure ground, and that the children have plans of their own, they decide to move South (probably Vancouver) and to pick up a new life.

A second aspect in which the text is shaped by its potential readership is that the text not only sets out to record an individual emigrant experience, but attempts to make general statements about emigration: there are lessons to be learnt here by potential subsequent emigrants. This more didactic purpose of the text comes out in a number of passages. Brandis is, for example, much concerned with the definition of the "good" emigrant, and with the preconditions necessary for becoming one. It is essential, she asserts, to prepare well before leaving, especially by learning the language: many emigrants have come to grief because of poor language skills, and many will never integrate into the new land. This is especially a problem for women, who tend to stay at home and have little exposure to the new language. Also because of a tendency to seek out friends from within the emigrant community, women might fall far behind their husbands, and of course their children. Children will pick up the language by simple osmosis, and the next generation will have no problems in this respect: they will not only learn the language, but automatically become Canadians.

In addition to language preparation, there is

also the need to learn about the new country after arrival, by means of books, newspapers, radio and (later) television, and of course by talking to others. The latter in particular can be intimidating and frustrating, Brandis admits, but many an emigrant has failed to feel truly at home simply because of his or her unwillingness to engage in an everyday conversation with a native Canadian.

Despite such admonitions, however, it is clear even from Brandis' own text that contact with Dutch people in the new community remains strong. This is only logical, since emigrant communities especially in the beginning are built on a kind of mutual aid. They tend to have reception committees, to draw upon their members for church work, often for social work, and so on. Newcomers are greeted by those already there and thus drawn into a miniature Holland away from home. Negotiating these diverse pulls requires skill. Certainly the Brandis show an unwavering commitment to their new country despite such strong ties with Holland. In particular, they take their responsibilities of citizenship very seriously, and the description of their journey to the nearest citizenship court over rugged terrain, and the depiction of the actual citizenship ceremony, belong to the highlights of the text (p. 101).

Inevitably, comparisons between Holland and Canada are drawn. In a simplified fashion, one might say that Holland appears in the text as a civilized and settled country, but one devastated by war, problems of population, density of settlement, lack of housing and lack of opportunity – as a country one loves but ultimately leaves. This does not involve a critical stance vis-à-vis the homeland, which remains part of the collective memory and which always has a large place in the heart. Everyday concerns for survival do dim the memories, however, and prevent a very great level of involvement with contemporary Holland: newspapers sent from Holland are in fact, Brandis comments wryly, used primarily for lighting the fire, and remain often unread. Sporadically, through newcomers from the homeland, memories resurface, and the talk turns to the past, but generally there is an attitude of "getting on" with the business of settling in and making a go of it.

Yet pride in the homeland surfaces in odd places: Maxine once organizes a Dutch tent at a local fair and displays a number of Dutch artifacts, old and new, whereby she wonders at the unfamiliarity of Canadians with such items as a coffee mill and a tea light. She also feels special pride in the achievement of post-war Holland, which in a very short time has regained much of its previous prosperity.

For the contemporary (Dutch)-Canadian reader the text in retrospect also offers some interesting comparisons with the Canada that emerges from the text, for in documenting emigrant experiences, Brandis' book also documents a period in Canadian history. The period covered, 1948-1957, is a time of great expansion after earlier sluggishness in Canada: there are many references to hard times in the crisis years just preceding the Brandis' arrival.

Some of the descriptions of small town Canada and some parts of the lifestyle of Canadians in the early fifties now may strike us as quaint. The isolation of the small town in the British Columbia interior is stressed over and over, as is the lack of amenities

and luxuries; these drawbacks, however, are compensated for by a sense of security and a relative lack of crime which create a sense of nostalgia in the reader. In particular, the behaviour of children and teenagers appears almost idyllic — although Maxine voices some concern with respect to the greater freedom of Canadian children when compared with her own. She herself attempts to remain strict, but cannot in the long run fight her environment. In any case, her own children are generally very well behaved: they appear to have fused the traditional values of respect and manners with the more easy-going and enterprising aspects of Canadian youth.

Ultimately, of course, the emigrant experience hinges on the degree of success with which the new land becomes a real home. Settling in and making a go of it is a two-way street, and the multiple and complex interrelationships with the already existing community and environment must of necessity be delineated carefully, if the emigrant experience is to succeed, and if the didactic purpose of the text — to set criteria for such a successful integration — is to be met.

It can be stated in general that the Brandis family's relations with their neighbours of non-Dutch extraction are excellent. The Brandis are an enterprising couple who seem genuinely to care for each other, and this appears to be felt by everyone around them. The couple very quickly earns the respect of the Canadian community, and in fact they almost turn into a model for Canadians in some of the specialized skills they provide. There is a genuine "rise of the family" in the community's eyes: Maxine Brandis is soon involved in the Girl Guides, while Bill becomes the head of the local cooperative. In rising in status, however, they do not see themselves as in any way unique: similar stories are quoted about other Dutch emigrants who have become foresters, bank managers, business people. The text offers little in the way of references to cultural, intellectual and artistic icons and models of Dutch extraction: success stories are limited to practical careers, and in this the text reflects the reality of most Dutch immigration. Brandis herself ended up going to University, as ultimately did her husband: he obtained a degree from an agricultural college. As the book ends, the children are set to get involved in academic studies themselves.

The book's conclusion reinforces the optimistic outlook which prevails in the text. There is a sense of gratitude for the opportunities provided by the new homeland, and the emigrant experience is by and large a positive one: hence the book's ability to function as a blueprint for others to follow.

Several passages in the text mark the progress of the process of integration and its successful overall conclusion. With five of the most representative passages I would like to end this paper.

1. Van de emigranten die naar Canada komen en allerhartelijkst door de Canadezen worden ontvangen, zijn er maar al te veel die zich blijvend door hen onder hun hoede laten nemen. De Canadezen zijn namelijk vol goede wil en willen alles voor de nieuw-Canadezen doen. Het gevolg is dat de nieuwkomers niet op eigen benen komen te staan. Ze blijven emigranten voor hun leven. Hun kinderen, dat is iets anders. Die gaan

naar school, leren de taal, de geschiedenis en aardrijkskunde van het nieuwe land; ze worden Canadees. Maar hun ouders – emigranten, die zelf de beslissing genomen hebben de grote stap te doen – die blijven vreemdelingen. (19)

2. Voor de nieuwkomertjes is het belangrijk zo min mogelijk bij de anderen af te steken: dezelfde kleren, hetzelfde soort eten, dezelfde potloden en schriften en schooltas te hebben; dit alles maakt hen veel gelukkiger dan dingen die ze van hun eigen land hebben meegebracht. Dit betekent niet dat je moet proberen hen zo gauw mogelijk alles van hun vroegere land te laten vergeten; o nee, dat is niet nodig. Een antieke ketel of een meegebracht meubelstuk dat nog afkomstig is uit grootmoeders huis, zal steeds met bewondering en ontzag worden bekeken; een oud Delfts tegeltje, een kalender, een paar sierklompjes zullen ze met trots aan hun vriendjes laten zien. Maar buitenshuis, op school, is het anders. Daar kunnen ze met hun *vreemdigheid*, hun *anderszijn* worden geplaagd. Dat kan heel gauw leiden tot een in-zich-zelf-keren, tot een gevoel van minderwaardigheid, wat tenslotte leidt tot een diepe afkeer van elke herinnering aan het oude land. (27)

3. Als je je angstig moet verschuilen, elke keer dat je in Canada een Canadees ontmoet, kun je je nooit in je nieuwe land op je gemak voelen. Dat verliezen veel emigranten uit het oog. Canada is een nieuw land. Als wij besluiten te emigreren, naar welk land ook, dan houdt dit besluit in dat je het nieuwe land als je eigen land moet gaan beschouwen. Dat wil zeggen: niet alleen van dit land accepteren wat het je geeft – levensonderhoud, bescherming, een plaats om te wonen – maar ook: geven aan dit land wat je vroeger aan je vaderland gaf. Dat is niet zo gemakkelijk in het begin, maar het groeit met de tijd. Het eerste wat je echter kunt en moet doen is: de taal leren spreken en begrijpen, je op de hoogte te stellen van de gewoonten en zeden en van de geschiedenis, de aardrijkskunde en de politiek. (75)

4. Mij is dikwijls verweten dat ik mijn geboorteland niet dankbaar ben. Ik geloof niet dat ik dit verwijt verdien. Toen ik nog in Nederland woonde, hield ik hartstochtelijk van mijn vaderland. Trouwens, ik heb er nog een grote bewondering voor en ik ben er trots op in Nederland geboren te zijn. Maar ik meen dat het, nu ik eenmaal besloten heb in Canada te blijven wonen, eerlijker is mij zoveel mogelijk één met dat land te voelen. Dat wil niet zeggen dat ik alles wat mij met Nederland verbindt, nu maar zo ineens wil uitvlakken; ik schep er maar al te graag over op. (128)

5. Als ik aan Canada denk prijs ik me gelukkig dat ik er wonen mag. We zijn er een deel van geworden, maar hebben kans gezien het waardevolle uit ons vroegere leven te behouden en daarmee ons huidige te verrijken. Op die manier maken veel emigranten hun leven en het leven van hen die al in Canada wonen,

rijker. Het bloed van onze voorvaderen zal zich vermengen met het bloed uit menig ander volk en door de aderen van onze kleinkinderen en achterkleinkinderen stromen. Hierdoor zal het Canada van de toekomst sterk zijn, want gemengd bloed schept gezonde mensen met een ruime kijk op het leven. Onze kinderen en hun afstammelingen zullen de door de oorlog veroorzaakte lege plaatsen aanvullen. Veel zoons van Canadezen hebben hun laatste rustplaats in Nederland gevonden. Hun graven worden liefdevol onderhouden. Dat is een dure plicht voor de Nederlanders.

Maar de taak van de emigranten is met hun kinderen goede Canadezen te worden die de plaats zullen innemen van hen die vielen en die daarbij hun leven gaven voor onze vrijheid. Wij zijn dankbaar dat we op die manier een beetje van de grote schuld hebben kunnen afbetalen. (151)