

A Year In Holland – Part I

Stewart Hendrickson

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After joining the faculty at St. Olaf College (Northfield, MN) in 1968, I was eligible for my first sabbatical leave in 1974-75. Sabbatical leaves are the most advantageous perks – salary certainly isn't – of academic life. At St. Olaf College, tenured faculty were eligible for a sabbatical leave every seventh year. After approval of a leave plan, the college would pay up to 70% of the current salary. In 1973-74, I started making plans for my sabbatical.

A year abroad seemed attractive, as the only foreign countries I had ever visited were Mexico and Canada. But where to go? My former graduate professor recommended Utrecht, in The Netherlands. The Biochemistry Department at the University of Utrecht was one of the leading places for lipid research – my field of interest – and Professor van Deenen was one of their leading researchers. With my mentor's recommendation, van Deenen invited me to come. I was currently applying for renewal of my current research grant and included work in Utrecht as part of it.

Our whole family – my wife Betty, son Matthew (12), and twin daughters, Krista and Klara (10) – would spend a year in Utrecht, so we began to make plans. The University offered to rent us a furnished townhouse in Utrecht. We began to learn Dutch using a textbook from Calvin College (founded by Dutch immigrants in Michigan). Using this text and related audiotapes, we began our studies. Dutch is closer to English and simpler than German; it has lost many of the German case endings. However, it is harder to pronounce. As Betty and I studied Dutch, the kids were less enthusiastic.

As we planned for our departure in August, we booked our flights on Islandic Airlines. Islandic was the cheapest airline to fly to Europe at that time, and fit our tight budget. We flew from Minneapolis to Chicago where we boarded an Islandic flight to Luxemburg with one stop in Reykjavík. In route from Chicago to Reykjavík we discovered that Krista was subject to air sickness. After she lost her breakfast, I made the mistake of taking her off the plane for another breakfast during our stop in Reykjavík; she then lost that meal en route to Luxemburg.

After a steep descent into the airport in Luxemburg, we collected our luggage and took a cab into the city where we had reserved a room for the night. After adjusting to the time change, we took a train the next morning to Utrecht, and then a cab to our new home at *zesendertig* (36) Eykmanlaan, in the Utrecht neighborhood of Tuindorp. Ours was a typical attached three-story townhouse with small gardens front and back and a garage off the alley. A living room, small kitchen, and WC (water closet) were on the ground floor, a bedroom and bathroom (bath only) on the second, and two more bedrooms on the third, with a WC on each floor.

After a week in Utrecht, we traveled to England to visit our friend John Bolitho and his family in Hatfield, north of London. They introduced us to some of the ways of living in Europe, including how to grind our beans for coffee – that was not yet common in the US.

We returned to Utrecht and began to settle in. We decided we could do without a car – travel by bus and rail was far better than owning a car. We bought a *gezinskaart* (family rail pass) so our family could travel by train paying only two adult fares. And we bought five bicycles (*fiets*), which came with a bell and attached generator/light – in the dark northern winter months, commuting in the mornings and afternoons happened in the dark. Most roads in the city had separate bicycle lanes with their own traffic lights in addition to those for cars and pedestrians. In the countryside, there were often bicycle paths (*fietspads*) separate from the roads or highways. Everyone in Holland biked and there were often more *fiets* than autos on the roads – I biked several kilometers to the university each day among large groups of cyclists.

The University of Utrecht (*Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht*) is one of the oldest in Holland (1634) – ranked 52 in the world and the highest in Holland. The main campus is in the inner city (*centrum*) centered around the University Hall (the Treaty of Utrecht Hall), completed in 1462, where the Treaty of Utrecht was signed in 1579, marking the origin of the Dutch nation. The Science Campus (the *Uithof*) where I worked, was a new campus located just outside the city limits. During my year at the University, a graduate student in our group made his final Ph.D. thesis defense. It was held in the Treaty of Utrecht Hall with full medieval pomp and rituals – quite impressive! Afterward, family and friends celebrated with food and drink.

Utrecht is an ancient city whose origins go back to around 50 CE when it was a Roman fortification built on what was then the main branch of the river Rhine. It was simply known as *Traiectum* – a crossing of the Rhine – and was the axis of major trade routes. It was the center of Christianity in the Netherlands from about 650-1579. The main Gothic church, which had the tallest church tower in all of the Low Lands, was built from around 1321-1382. It was never finished, only the tower and nave were built (before the use of flying buttresses). A devastating tornado swept through Utrecht on August 2, 1674, collapsing the nave, leaving only the tower (*Domtoren*).

Utrecht was built around a curving canal (the *Oudegracht*) connecting the city with the main channel of the Rhine. Later, when the main channel moved south through Rotterdam, the level of the canal dropped, leaving a lower wharf where storehouses were built under the upper street level. Some of these were later converted into cafés and shops giving the canal a unique appearance.

Education in the Netherlands is compulsory from ages five (sometimes four) through sixteen. After that there is partial compulsory education, meaning a

student must attend some form of education for at least two days a week. Public, private, and religious schools are all equally supported by the State.

Krista and Klara attended a public elementary school a short distance from our house – they walked home for lunch each day. Although the teacher could speak English, she only spoke English to our girls the first couple of days – after that, it was only Dutch, although she spoke simple words to them and asked them to observe what the other students were doing. That was hard, and after the first week they were quite frustrated – Krista announced during lunch one day, “I’m not going back to that school again!” After lunch, they both returned. Over several weeks they quickly picked up Dutch. After a while, they were speaking Dutch with no accent, and often forgot which language they were speaking. There were two American girls about their same age living a few doors from our house. One day Krista walked into their house with some Dutch friends and started speaking English to her American friends. The Dutch boy she was with asked her, “*hoe kun je zo goed Engels spreken?*” (how can you speak such good English?). That was a compliment to her spoken Dutch!

Matt bicycled to a private middle school a little farther away. It was an *Atheneum* school, which prepared students for higher education. In Northfield he was in middle school, beginning algebra on an advanced track. His teacher gave him the next math textbook to study in Holland. Math at his Dutch school was not as advanced, so he was allowed to study math on his own. In his “English” class the teacher used him as an aid to teach the Dutch students. Matt learned to speak Dutch, but they could always tell he was from someplace else, he didn’t have an authentic Dutch accent.

The Northfield schools were understanding about students going abroad for a year – many were children of college professors on leave – and didn’t require them to make up their missed year when they returned. Studying abroad was considered a positive part of their education.

At the University, where I worked in the Biochemistry Department, everybody spoke English, and usually also German and French. They spoke English to me and Dutch to each other, so it was harder for me to practice my rudimentary Dutch. Betty volunteered to work with other parents at our girls’ school. Not all the parents could speak English – it was a working-class neighborhood – so she had a lot of practice speaking Dutch. She could speak it much better than I. For a time we and an American family living down the street hired a tutor to come once a week and help us with the language.

We also had to get used to a new currency and a different banking system. At that time the *Guilder* was worth about half the amount of a US dollar. There was nothing equivalent to our checks for paying bills. To pay someone money I had to go to my bank and ask for a bank transfer – they would then transfer money from my account directly into someone else’s account. Paying for most things was done with cash. I went to my bank and transferred money from my Northfield bank

account – I was paid in US dollars from St Olaf – and took out enough cash in Guilders for a week or two. I also paid our rent by bank transfer. Our monthly rent was 700 Guilders. When I first wrote out that amount, I wrote the number seven in the American way without crossing the 7 – the Dutch write the number one more like a number 7 with a slight upward stroke before the down stroke. The receipt for our rent came back for one hundred Guilders, oops! I then learned to cross my number seven and my letter Z, which I still do out of habit, not to confuse anyone.

Shopping in Holland was a different experience. We had a half-size under-the-counter refrigerator so we had to go shopping every few days. The nearest grocery was *Albert Heijn* a few blocks away – a grocery chain, but not quite a supermarket at that time. We walked there past a small canal with several resident Friesian swans. Swans are not nice docile birds, they can be quite aggressive and deliver painful swipes with their wings. When our girls walked by, they were often threatened, especially if they were carrying bread – they walked fast.

One nice shopping option was the *winkel op wielen* (grocery store on wheels). A large van outfitted as a small grocery store came by our house once a week in the late afternoon. It saved a trip to the grocery store for small items and also the heavy ones – beer and milk – which we didn't want to carry home. It kept me well supplied with Heineken beer.

Then there were open markets. The market on the *Vredenburg*, near the central train station, was the largest, featuring countless stalls offering fresh fruit and vegetables, bread, meat, fish, and plenty of cheese. There were typical Dutch snacks such as *kibbeling* (deep-fried fish), *stroopwafels* (thin waffles with syrup in between), *gerookte paling* (smoked eel), and *nieuwe haring*. The new herring came to market around early June. It was gutted, beheaded, and served essentially raw, typically with chopped onions. Grab it by the tail. tilt your head back, bite into it and let it slither down your throat – quite a delicacy. It was also served in a small bun – *Broodje Haring*. Another popular street food was *frites mit mayonnaise* (French fries with mayonnaise).

Everyday food in Holland was quite plain – I'm sure it's different now. If you asked someone what they had for dinner they would first name all the vegetables, then meat, if any, as an afterthought. *Stamppot*, mashed potatoes with different options for vegetables, is traditionally eaten in winter. *Snert*, also called *erwtensoeep*, is a very thick pea soup, served either as a main dish or as an appetizer, also eaten during winter. Fish is common: *Mosselen* (mussels) are quite popular and commonly served with French fries, and *Kibbeling*, chunks of sea fish battered and fried. We, however, ate mostly American dinners at home. Lunch might be a *boterham*, an open-face bread sandwich with cheese or cold cuts. Or *hagel* (sprinkles of chocolate) over buttered bread. *Nutella*, a chocolate and hazelnut spread, which we first discovered in Holland, was quite popular. Coffee was served very strong in small cups with sugar. At the snack bar at the

University, I always skipped the sugar cubes, which they couldn't understand and always reminded me that they were included in the price. Beer was plentiful – Heineken in the west and Grolsch in the east. Advocaat was a rich and creamy traditional Dutch alcoholic beverage made from eggs, sugar, and brandy.

Holland has had a long association with Indonesia, a former colony. Colonists coming back brought with them a love for Indonesian food. Many restaurants in Holland featured this food. A popular item was *rijsttafel* (rice table), which features small dishes of Indonesian delicacies, some very spicy, served around a mound of rice. There was a small Indonesian take-out place near our house where I often went to pick up a dinner. They spoke mostly Indonesian, very little Dutch, and no English. Ordering consisted of pointing and other hand gestures. I never knew what I was getting until I came home and opened the bag – it was all very good but sometimes extremely spicy.

Another Dutch specialty was *pannenkoeken* – large, thinner than our pancakes but not as thin as crêpes, with bacon, apple, cheese, or other fillings. Our favorite *pannenkoekenhuis* was *De Muntkelder* on the lower level of the *Oudegracht* (old canal). On a nice sunny day we would sit outside and watch small boats pass by while eating these delicious treats – no knives and forks, we would roll them up and eat with our hands.

This is Part I. In Part II, which I will post later, I will tell about our everyday life and adventures around Holland, Belgium, a bit of Germany.

Stewart Hendrickson (hend@stolaf.edu) is Professor Emeritus (chemistry), St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN; and Research Professor Emeritus (chemistry), University of Washington, Seattle, WA. He lives with his cat, Igor, in the Ballard area of Seattle, WA.