

NIAS IN RETROSPECT

Between Christmas and the New Year 1970, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a phone call telling me I had been chosen as the Deputy Director of the newly created Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

I had four teenagers, aged between 11 and 18, who had reacted enthusiastically when I first informed them of my need and wish to find a job. Their positive reaction was in no way diminished even when I warned them of the consequences of this, that I would not be at home when they returned from school and that I would have less time for them.

During my interview for the job I had been given a rough idea of the conception of the institute by Professor Misset who had been appointed two months earlier as Director of NIAS. The aim of the institute was to provide an ideal environment for research in the humanities and the social sciences, enabling talented scholars of repute from the Netherlands and elsewhere to devote themselves to the study of subjects of their own choosing in a setting in which interaction and cooperation among workers in different fields would be promoted and stimulated. Each fellow would have a study room at his disposal. Other facilities would include a daily library service to provide the books they needed, as well as other forms of support. Colloquia, workshops and conferences could be organized as required.

It sounded fascinating and turned out to be even more so when realised. For the first half year we were closeted with one secretary in a small room above a supermarket in Leiden. The most pressing thing requiring our attention was the building in Wassenaar which was to house the institute. My first official working day was to be on Monday 2 February, 1971. However, I went along to the new property on the Sunday, because I had received the architect's designs from Misset with the request to study them and make appropriate remarks before we met the people from the Building Office of Leiden University the very next day.

After driving around for some time I found the Meijboomlaan and entered the lovely beech-lined drive

leading to the house. The former Police Training School had been empty for over two years and most of the windows on the ground floor had been smashed and were now boarded up. I stood there pensively, looking at the villa with its many chimneys and had a strange feeling that I had seen the building before, that I actually knew the house. There was an odd impression of *déjà vu*, but I was thrown momentarily by an ugly additional wing to the house and a large wooden barrack standing next to the building, until I began to believe my feeling of having been there before was mistaken.¹

I managed to break in at the back of the house by pulling loose a few lathes, and spent a couple of hours in the building with the designs laid out on the floor. When I climbed out, I almost bumped into an elderly couple who, looking very suspiciously at me asked what I was doing. It turned out they were neighbours who kept an eye on things. The result of my search enabled us to come up with ten major suggestions at our meeting the next day. For instance, there was no Common Room because the architect intended to split the lovely sitting room, with the deep window seats and open fireplace, into two study rooms. There were not enough studies for forty fellows, so we proposed building more rooms in the attic – rooms which in fact later became some of the most popular in the institute. Furthermore to create – by taking a small part of the hall – an extra room for the Deputy Director, strategically situated next to the Director's office.

After Misset had explained the changes we required, the reaction was that any alterations would have to be placed before the Planning Authority ('Schoonheidscommissie') and that it would take at least four months to get the required permission. This delay in starting the building activities was impossible because the institute had to be opened on the first of October.

Next morning I still felt frustrated at the course of events. I called the municipality and asked the name of the Chairman of that committee. I called him, apologising for contacting him directly, and explained why I was taking such an unusual step. He assured me that every request and documentation reaching the

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committee on a Tuesday was always dealt with by the following Thursday. Other bodies were guilty of the well-known delays. And so in two days we received the green light to go ahead on all points. And although I was later reproached by Leiden for supposedly pulling strings through my connections, my conscience was clear and I enjoyed the little victory. Those, then, were my first two days.

Then began the hectic time! With Professor Uhlenbeck, the initiator and constant promotor of the institute, and Misset, there were brainstorming discussions on so many different topics. Decisions had to be taken about very different things: such as the selection procedures – already started in the summer of 1970 – the functioning of the library, composition of the staff, housing of the fellows and their families, should we or should we not provide warm meals, should we protect

fellows from constant telephone calls, etc., etc.? Our model was Palo Alto, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences – the place where Professor Uhlenbeck had been, the place he was still raving about!

My assignment was, amongst other things, to attend construction meetings, keep an eye on the progress of work and to furnish the buildings. A strange task for a jurist. One piece of luck was the chance I was given at that time to look round the newly built Erasmus University. That visit convinced me not to furnish all the rooms in a similar office-style of grey metal, but to try and achieve an individual touch in a variety of colours and materials, so that every fellow could choose a study where he would feel comfortable. Remembering the Salzburg Seminar in American studies where the tasteful interior had a few antiques which gave it a special quality, I found an antique dealer in the east of



the country who sold me two very attractive cupboards and a large antique chest for the ridiculous price of 600 guilders. Proud of my find I learned on my return that the government does not allow the purchase of 'second-hand' goods! So I bought them myself from my own first NIAS salary and lent them to the institute. I provided every room with a narrow couch so that the fellows could rest for a moment during their work – it wasn't long before they were being called the meditation beds.

There was another housing problem. There was no room for a kitchen, a dining room or a conference room in the main building. These facilities were temporarily installed in the large wooden barrack. Temporarily, because the barrack-hut should be removed within a few years according to a government stipulation in the deed of sale. When that period had already expired, the house opposite the institute which housed a midwives training school (the reason for its name the 'Ooievaarsnest' – Stork's nest) came up for sale. We were very fortunate to acquire it and in addition were allowed to have a small wing added to the main building containing a conference room and four additional study rooms.

Now at last every activity had its place, conferences, social activities, lunches, but where would the fellows live? Several planned to bring their families consisting of two to six children. Accommodation remained a headache. We had our eyes on the newly built houses in Van Polanenpark. They were owned by the ABP (National Civil Pension Fund) but several requests were refused. It is not easy to find payable accommodation in Wassenaar, and although I found several houses it was not enough.

Some months later, in deliberation with Misset, I visited the ABP offices again and by chance met with a lower functionary. I tried to convince him and explained the risk that the outstanding institute of NIAS might not be able to remain in Wassenaar unless it could find decent housing at decent prices. Appeasement won the day, and we were given four houses to begin with.

There were other problems connected with housing. The planned reconstruction of the ground floor of the garage of the gatekeeper's lodge into four bedrooms. It was clear this would not be ready in time so we appealed to the inhabitants of the villas in the vicinity of the institute for lodgings for a NIAS fellow for approximately three months. The reaction was most heartening. One neighbour even offered lodgings for two fellows.

A fellow of the first year, Professor Simpson of the U.S.A., insisted again and again during the alterations on finding an appropriate name for the gatehouse. At the opening of the small building I had made – as a joke – a large board with 'Simpson Hall' fixed on the wall. He was so flattered that we left the board and the building was known as such from that time onwards. It vanished only recently.

Between all these activities the remaining staff had to be selected during the months before opening. It was pleasant to discover that Henk Misset and I had pretty much the same opinion on the many candidates. Dinny Young was the first to be selected, and she was immediately despatched to visit libraries and prepare the important library service. In September the staff counted 18 able members. The gardener, however, proved to be more an artist than an artisan, making sculptures from the parts of old bicycles in the cellar of NIAS. One of these frightening dinosaur-like reptiles still guards the Ooievaarsnest entrance.

It was very important to find a suitable couple as concierge and cook as they would be the resident staff. There was an overwhelming number (100) of replies to our advertisement – almost certainly because we could offer modest accommodation (on the second floor of the gatehouse) at a time when housing was at a premium in Holland. The curious thing is that the first couple we interviewed was by far the best – the unforgettable Fonteins, she, Annuska, a gifted and blessed cook, he, Henk, the most helpful, modest and technically very able man.

These two became so well-loved that when they celebrated their silver wedding in 1977 the fellows contributed so generously that we were able to buy the donkey Annuska had always dreamed of possessing. And what a moment that was. The reception took place in the NIAS library and then the french windows were opened to reveal a baby donkey. In one movement Annuska threw her flowers to the ground, fell on her knees and embraced the donkey, saying 'Oh, I will be so good to you'. The previous evening you could have seen the small library car 'then a modest Renault 4' with a donkey in the back sniffing and nibbling at my hair on the way to Rijksdorp. It spent the night in the garage of one of the neighbours so that it would not betray itself by braying



It was not long before somebody wrote the poem:

'A donkey, a fellow,
the difference is clear.
It's not in the mind
but just in the ear'.

I became more and more nervous as the opening day approached. Would the furniture arrive in time? Would people like the furniture I had chosen? So many doubts raced through my mind. It was opening day minus one. Some important furniture had not arrived, and I had to race to Amsterdam with a horsebox to fetch the missing chairs. Imagine my embarrassment the next day at the opening reception as – engaged in conversation with an important official – my eyes caught sight of a tuft of straw sticking out from under a chair!

I still think of those first NIAS fellows and staff as somehow inspired by a team-spirit. We all wanted the institute to be successful. Apart from the important task of typing sometimes three or more drafts (no word-processors yet!) for the fellows, several staff members learned to answer most questions on travelling, different types of taxes, import and export regulations for cars, doctors, schools for the children (a 6-year-old Japanese boy learned to speak fluent Dutch in 3 months). Every year most of the staff helped to get the houses ready for the newcomers. When they arrived, generally after a very long and tiring journey, they found the beds made,

and twenty-four hours worth of food, flowers and a bottle of sherry as a welcome on behalf of the institute.

It was interesting to observe how, each year, the fellows formed a bond. Meeting with each other over lunch, with prolonged discussions, sometimes continuing deep into the night. Most of them were noticeably happy. They had received the most precious present one could give them – a whole year to devote themselves to their research under ideal circumstances, surrounded by prominent colleagues from many different disciplines, time to read, think and write, that usurper of peace – the telephone – banned from study rooms and, lastly, but by no means least, a dedicated staff to assist where it could.

Five years passed and the institute had clearly proved to be a success. Applications for fellowships were increasing every year. The production of books and articles was very satisfactory. Most fellows declared that they would never have been able to write their book(s) or articles without that NIAS year.

We celebrated the First Lustrum with lectures, a concert, a buffet and cabaret, written and acted by the NIAS staff.

While writing this I suddenly realise how long ago these things happened in spite of it seeming like







yesterday. For ten years I had the privilege to work at NIAS and enjoyed every moment of it, except that every year we had to say goodbye. Then pension rules forced me to leave but my heart remained. NIAS is already approaching its fifth lustrum, it is flourishing. I wish it Godspeed.

¹ When I heard that the family del Court van Krimpen had lived in the house. I remembered suddenly that I had brought them a message during the war that their son-in-law, Linthorst Homan, later Royal Commissioner in the Province of Friesland, had arrived safely in England using an escape line. In the winter of 1942/43 the family was given four days by the German occupying forces to evacuate their house: they returned soon after the liberation, but only for a short period.