

'Pauper Paradise': the Dutch Re-education Laboratory

Journalist Suzanna Jansen's *Pauper Paradise* (Het pauperparadijs) is a clever and moving description of the attempts to re-educate and integrate 'the dregs of humanity' in the Netherlands in the period from 1823 to 1973. Her family history leads us through the utopian projects that were intended to combat pauperism in the nineteenth century.

The author begins by showing us what the ideal (closely associated with the ideal of the enlightenment) of the perfectible human being could achieve in a liberal society. She then provides an evocative insight into the functioning of the principles of charity, social democracy and the welfare state. It emerges clearly that in the last two centuries it has become steadily easier for individuals to break the chains of poverty. But even though 'not to be made destitute' has become a right, this tale of penury and impotence is still an important reflection on society. For the stigma of the 'underclass' seems once more to be lying in wait. Just think for a moment of what can happen to people with Turkish or Moroccan-sounding names, or of the term 'alien' with all its connotations.

When checking the information on an obituary card for her great grandmother, Suzanna Jansen chanced on the unusual fact that her family originates from Veenhuizen. Until the 1980s this settlement for convicts and beggars was the property of the Ministry of Justice. It was also known as 'the Dutch Siberia' because it was so far from civilisation, out there in the wilds of Drenthe.

Just as natives and slaves could perform useful tasks on the plantations of the Dutch Indies provided they were properly organised, when Johannes van den Bosch founded the Benevolent Society (Maatschappij van Weldadigheid) in 1818 he thought that by so doing he could tackle the problem of poverty in the Netherlands. Discipline and fresh air away from alehouses and brothels would make new people of the urban paupers. By a united effort poor families, vagrants and orphans were 'despatched' to the Society's open and enclosed settlements. In total some 70,000 people



'Vagrants' Day' in Veenhuizen, 2008.

would spend, if not their whole lives, at least the greater part of them, in one of these large institutions. Despite the considerable investment – modern weaving and spinning machinery was installed – the ideals of a self-supporting population and the eradication of poverty proved unattainable. On the contrary, the people who were 'despatched' remained poor and the fact that they came from the 'settlements' was perceived as a stigma. Moreover, the character of Veenhuizen changed in 1843, when all those found guilty of vagrancy anywhere in the Netherlands were sent there. For three whole generations Jansen's forebears returned there time and again.

From Jansen's chequered family history, in which poverty and alcohol abuse are interwoven with utopianism and emancipation, the reader gains a good picture of the social history of the Netherlands, in which state intervention has grown ever greater. She manages not only to re-create touching life stories from data in the archives, but also seamlessly to interweave them with the broader events of the time. By recounting her emotions during her research and when visiting Veenhuizen, that nowadays accommodates a prison museum and five penal establishments, she conveys to the reader the depth of her commitment. She discovers that the first of her ancestors to live in Veenhuizen was not 'someone who had gone off the rails' at all, but a soldier honourably discharged from Napoleon's army, who like many other veterans had been taken on as a guard. Although his family lived apart from the paupers, and although he was paid a modest amount and had a vegetable patch, none the less his position in the pauper settlement meant that for three generations his descendants were inextricably linked to the detest-

ed Veenhuizen, and for five generations to poverty.

The Netherlands Central Statistical Bureau has calculated that of the current 16 million inhabitants of the Netherlands one million must have had ancestors in the pauper settlements. The Drenthe Archive had long been planning to digitise the personal details in the archives of the Benevolent Society's open and enclosed settlements. When *Pauper Paradise* was almost completed, they decided to speed up the digitising to enable a combined publicity effort with Suzanna Jansen. As a result, in May 2008 an 'Ancestors Day' was organised, when prominent Dutch citizens such as Ruud Lubbers, the former prime minister, were presented with personal data on those of their ancestors with a settlement past. And as it turned out, the general public was indeed interested in this recent history: since then there have been twenty impressions of *Pauper Paradise* and over 80 thousand copies have been sold. And among other things there has been a noticeable rise in the number of people visiting the prison museum and the Drenthe Archive.

The utopian projects have not succeeded in eradicating poverty, but during the years that followed the Second World War initiatives were put in place to humanise the penal establishments in the Drenthe settlements. Eventually re-education was more closely tailored to the individual and to rehabilitation, while not excluding the group system. It is to be hoped that Jansen's most instructive history of what she herself refers to as '*the Dutch re-education laboratory*' may also arouse interest abroad.

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