

From Weekly to Monthly

Vrij Nederland

In December 2016, the once so famous Dutch weekly magazine *Vrij Nederland* was transformed into a monthly publication, with a modernised website for more current contributions. This was a necessary move in the light of decades of steadily dwindling circulation. After reaching a peak of 120,000 in 1978, paid circulation had collapsed to 45,000 copies in 2010, before halving again over the next five years. For anyone over 50 who – to paraphrase the Dutch writer Renate Rubinstein (1929–1990) – ‘used to be on the left, but has not moved to the right’, that was a sobering moment; yet another confirmation that the world of their youth no longer exists.

When I became a student in Amsterdam in 1977, I took out a subscription to the *Vrij Nederland* weekly, which at the time was seen as the Valhalla of journalism and as representing the conscience of progressives in the Netherlands. I wallowed in the overblown prose of Martin van Amerongen – who by his own admission wrote mainly about old socialists, oddball vicars and dead German poets – and avidly read the interminable articles by Igor Cornelissen about the infernal arguments that had tormented the workers’ movement in the past. The high point of the week was often the interview by Bibeb, who not only persuaded artists to allow a glimpse deep into their souls, but who also often tempted figures of authority to say more than they had been intending. Then there were the surprising and often provoking columns by Renate Rubinstein and Hugo Brandt Corstius, while an array of investigative journalists wrote extensively about the perfidious and underhand plans of greedy businesses, over-zealous civil servants and (right-wing) politicians. A sharp eye was also kept on international affairs, with the imperialist United States and its allies being seen as the principal villains. When the legendary cabaret duo Neerlands Hoop campaigned against Dutch participation in the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, they were given a platform

in *Vrij Nederland*. The magazine had a lot to offer on the cultural front, too, as illustrated by the fact that the colour supplement, launched in 1977, dedicated its content entirely to books once a month.

I cancelled my subscription in 1986. Van Amerongen was by now editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*, Igor Cornelissen was increasingly writing about Trotskyist philatelists or people who had shaken the hand of Willy Brandt in the 1930s, and Hugo Brandt Corstius had accused Renate Rubinstein, the daughter of a Jewish father, of ‘neo-anti-Semitism’. The once so refreshing reports by Gerard van Westerloo about ‘ordinary’ people also seemed to me to have become fairly monotonous, while the commentary on new plans by the government of the day led by Ruud Lubbers, or about the foreign policy of the United States, had also become fairly predictable.

Looking back, it became clear that the decline of *Vrij Nederland* had already begun then. An unsavoury tribal struggle had broken out in the editorial team, in which the actions and position of star reporter and champion moonlighter Joop van Tijn were often the bone of contention. On top of that, the circulation was steadily declining; it was no longer fashionable to be ‘on the left’, and many baby-boomers were no longer so interested in reading about the reprehensible actions of capitalists.

Broadly speaking, the period 1965–1985 was the golden age of *Vrij Nederland*, when the magazine was regarded as the best and most important weekly publication in the Netherlands. Anyone who did not live through this period may be surprised about the moral superiority assumed by this former resistance magazine – most of the editors had experienced the Second World War as babies or toddlers. Whether the topic was a census, the policy on minorities, the debate about nature or nurture or plans to keep the welfare state affordable, the war was brought into everything. And the fact that the journalists who wrote for *Vrij Nederland* and the subscribers who read it were on the ‘right side’ went without saying. Sporadically, the magazine did contain criticism levelled at the ideas it espoused, for example in the form of the sociologist and political scientist Bart Tromp, who regularly lampooned the trendy left-wing ideas that were promoted in the magazine.

There is therefore no cause for too much nostalgia. During its peak years, the journalism in *Vrij Nederland* was very self-satisfied and, according to the rumours, the magazine 'floated on alcohol'. And in case anyone has forgotten: it was not just the mental hygiene that left something to be desired at that time; the same also applied for bodily care, as is apparent from a chance sentence in a report about the alternative psychiatric institution Nieuw-Dennendal, where according to the *Vrij Nederland* reporter the chaos was really not as bad as was sometimes asserted: 'In a family, too, not all the beds are always made, [...] and there's always a teenager who manages to avoid having their weekly shower.' The good old days?

ROB HARTMANS

Translated by Julian Ross

A book has recently been published on the history of *Vrij Nederland*, and specifically its glory years (1965-1985): JOHN JANSSEN VAN GALEN, *De gouden jaren van het linkse levensgevoel. Het verhaal van Vrij Nederland* (The golden age of left-wing thought. The story of *Vrij Nederland*, Balans, Amsterdam, 2016, 494 pp). This publication, which draws mainly on interviews and internal communications, is not available in English.

Music

A Double Talent with a Double Personality

Jaap van Zweden

Jaap van Zweden has an illustriously unconventional career. His father was a pianist and, going by the television series dedicated to Jaap a year ago, it was abundantly clear he was 'a man of the people'. That folkish character trait was handed down from father to son, even when the son turned out to be an exceptionally talented violinist. Born in Amsterdam in 1960, by age ten he was already receiving pats on the back by such old maestros as Theo Olof, and at seventeen he won the Dutch Oskar Back Violin Competition before going to study at the Juilliard School of Music in New York. He hadn't even turned twenty when he became concertmaster of Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in 1979. Two worlds co-existed side by side – and Jaap felt it. The older, respectable orchestra members thought he was too much of a working-class lad who ought to shine his shoes more often. Not only was he soon performing the more 'received' repertoire with leading conductors, but also delving into more popular realms of classical music. He played concerts by Locatelli and Vivaldi (he did not really pay that much attention to historically informed performance), but was just as happy to perform with such musicians as Dutch flautist Beldien Sternberg (b. 1957). He was equally as fond of Gershwin arrangements as he was of Rihm and Mendelssohn. In a 1990 interview, he declared he wanted to be considered among the top fifteen living violinists in the world. And if Bernstein asks you to record his Serenade, then you are getting close.

Because of his position at the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, he was permanently able to work with the greatest conductors of the day. That experience awakened the desire to become a conductor himself, certainly when Bernstein once asked him to lead a rehearsal in his absence. Van Zweden was also extremely ambitious as a conductor. After several successful stints conducting various Dutch orchestras, in 1996 he became