

Henriette Sophia Suzanna in the Shadow of Father Abram

By

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Henriette Sophia Suzanna Kuyper (1870-1933) was as capable as her father. She lived at least seven lives: Head of the household since her mother died in 1899; her father's secretary; writer, global traveler, caregiver, public speaker, organizer of the women's wing of the antirevolutionary social pillar. Nevertheless, it is difficult to get a clear picture of her. Father Abraham, or "Bram" as he was more intimately known, always intervened; she stood for ever in his shadow. That was not only because of him, for Henriette Sophie, as I will call her after the magazine itself, adored her father boundlessly.

Reading things historically is difficult. Her family name was "Jetta," while her friends called her "Harry." She was a leader in the Gereformeerde women's movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, but by more recent standards, at the beginning of the twenty-first century she would probably have scored negatively.

Henriette was the third child and the oldest of three daughters. Though she had the capacity, she did not follow the academic route, for that did not seem proper at the time. However, she did audit a number of her father's lectures as well as of his friend Rutgers. Regardless of her lack of formal education, she was very adept in foreign and ancient languages.

In 1901 she translated a novel written by the American Caroline Atwater-Mason. At the invitation of that author, she traversed America in 1905. She wrote a tome of 450 pages about that trip. She was impressed with the potentials women in the US enjoyed and learnt public speaking there, something her father had always resisted. She was indignant for not being allowed to study, and commented, "In Cambridge, the elm tree under which George Washington accepted command of the American army in 1775, is still on display. I pass by this elm on my way to Radcliffe College, where some 500 ladies receive the same education under the same professors as Harvard students to receive the degrees of B.A. and M.A.,

¹ Aart Deddens, trans. Jan H. Boer, "Hoe is het om een beroemde vader te hebben?" .

though not a Ph.D. This restraint on women seemed odd to Americans, but the city of Boston, unlike others, is conservative and considers retaining the *status quo* important. She adds in a footnote that it is even worse in England, for there women may sit for exams but not earn an academic degree!

Madurodam²

Henriette also visited Russia. In 1903, Petersburg hosted an exhibition around the title “The World of the Child.” The Dutch contribution earned the second prize and Henriette, who had played an important role, received a high Russian decoration of honour. She wrote about her Russian trip in the magazine *Timotheus*.

Upon her return from the USA, she compares that country with the much less developed Russia. America stands alone at the top with a lot of empty space below. Then follows Russia and then.... While Madurodam was built a mere fifty years later, she writes disillusioned about the Netherlands, “So small, so charmingly small. As if, as in a fairytale, with the aid of a magic wand, people crawled through a tiny hole and landed in the miniature world like Madurodam, where pencils are telephone posts and teacups swimming pools; where people live in match boxes and sail the canals in nutshells. So strange—while everything is so cute and small, the little people find it all very important.”

Do not Disturb Please

In the course of her complete self-sacrifice for the family and neglecting herself in serving her father, Henriette reserved two hours per day for herself. She would hang a sign “Do not disturb please” on the door to her room where she would busy herself with writing poetry and short stories. I read her *Liefde’s Leed*³ but was not impressed. Her travel accounts are much better. But to read this historically requires understanding her context: The literature available in the nineteenth century was of very poor quality compared to that of the twentieth. Her writings make it clear she had a strong unfulfilled longing for motherhood and for erotic

² Madurodam is a miniature park and tourist attraction in ...The Hague in the Netherlands. It is home to a range of 1:25 scale model replicas of famous Dutch landmarks, historical cities and large developments. The park was opened in 1952 and has since been visited by tens of millions of visitors.

³ *Love’s Suffering*.

love. She must have experienced her appointment as member of the Society of Netherland Literature⁴ as a grand recognition.

***Mejuffrouw* or Miss⁵**

All three of Kuyper's daughters were stuck with the title of "*Mejuffrouw*," throughout their lives, an ambiguous term—and therefore discriminatory—as to both their gender and their social status: they had not yet been spoken for. After her father's death, she lived with her closest friend Harriet Groos and her sister Jo. When she was left alone after Harriet's death, Henriette fell victim to a severe depression. This in turn led to a fatal case of pneumonia. She died soon after her friend in 1933.

Theory and Practice

At the end, Henriette lived an independent life for only a dozen years. During World War I, together with her sister Johanna, who was a nurse, she established an ambulance service in Budapest and daily nursed the wounded. She wrote, "To be able to help is liberation from the pressure of suffering." Then, together with her sister, she was called home; her father was ill. From 1916 till the year of his death in 1920 the two provided intensive care for him. They reported on this part of their lives in an incredibly loving but simultaneously demystifying book, *The Eve of the Life of Dr. A. Kuyper*.⁶ The very first sentence already brings one to tears: "We have had to learn from our earliest youth that our Father belonged in the first place to his life's calling for the Dutch people. His family took second place. My father was, before anything else, a public person."

How could this be? Did Kuyper have a secret private interpretation of his sovereignty theory? Was his own family an exception to the rule that the state has no business or influence in private sphere? Was it the statesman who sat at the dinner table and who lay in bed along the Kanaalstraat? Was his paternity a mere

⁴⁴ *Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde*

⁵ *Mejuffrouw* is a term difficult to translate with the same nuance. It indicates a social status below that of a married women. Somewhere I came across this footnote, but it does not give the full nuance: "Miss" is an English language honorific typically used for an unmarried woman, or of a married woman retaining her maiden name. Originating in the 17th century, it is a contraction of mistress. Its counterparts are Mrs., used for a married women who has taken her husband's name, and Ms., which can be used for married or unmarried women.

⁶⁶ *De Levensavond van Dr. A. Kuyper*.

neglected marginal function? I already said it: reading this story historically is difficult.

Hyper-perfectionism

Henriette wrote, “His work was a constant offering that he laid on God’s altar. And because it was meant for God’s altar, it had as much as possible be perfect without any blemish. As Leviticus 22:2 puts it so pointedly, “Tell Aaron and his sons to treat with respect the sacred offerings...so they will not profane My holy Name.”

Hyper-punctuality

Henriette also wrote, “How his powerful will dominated his own life as well as ours and forced the entire family into the service of his life’s calling. How he focused all his strength in creating optimum conditions for the success of his work. Those fixed imperturbable working hours. The strong methodical alternation between work, rest and walks—everything by the minute. That hyper-punctuality of mealtimes, not only for their beginning but even for their end.”

The Troelstra Revolution⁷

And then, in the midst of his sickness, there was that “Troelstra revolution of November 18, 1918, a completely failed copy of the Russian revolution, but which Kuyper endured, according to his daughters, as a hero. On the evening of that day Frisian troupes—all loyal Kuyperians—came with their Frisian flag hoisted high to sing in front of our house on the Kanaalstraat. They first sang the Frisian anthem, then the Dutch national anthem “Wilhelmus,” and, finally, “*Zij zullen het niet hebben,*”⁸

Sanatorium Laag-Soeren

During the summer of 1919, as per his habit, Kuyper wanted to go to the sanatorium Weiser Hirsch near Dresden, Germany. He went there even during World War I, but this time he was too sick. Forced by circumstances, he was now to stay at the sanatorium Laag-Soeren. The Kuyper family spiritualized this

⁷ Pieter Jelles Troelstra was a **Dutch lawyer, journalist and politician active in the socialist workers' movement**. He is most remembered for his fight for universal suffrage and his failed call for revolution at the end of World War I.

⁸ A popular traditional Dutch song: “They will not achieve.”

situation with John 21:18—“...when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Really. That’s what it says. I suspect that Peter, when his Saviour talked about his death, had his eye on a sanatorium in Laag-Soeren, not on a cross, out of thankfulness of his “double quick” over the water of the Apeldoorn canal to Eerbeek and back. God bless Laag-Soeren.

Conclusion

Henriette Sophie Kuyper has given more than she received. I try to believe that this is more blessed, but nevertheless retain a nasty aftertaste.