

Huis Doorn and the Future of History

By

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History is much closer to us than we often realize. The way people – living and dead – are interconnected is comparable to an intricate spider’s web built with many cross bonds, a veritable Gothic cathedral of human continuity. These beautiful structures are, like history itself, fragile. At the moment history is not à la mode. This is a sad development since history embraces the stories of all people, and forms the basis of an educated life. A good history teacher is a good storyteller.

In 1990, the American playwright John Guare wrote “Six Degrees of Separation.” This fascinating play about intertwined relationships is based on the intriguing assumption that each person is but six degrees of separation from every other person on earth. The same principle might be used to calculate how close we are to a famous historical personage. The obvious person in the context of this piece is Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859-1941). The son of Crown Prince Friedrich of Prussia and Princess Victoria of England, Wilhelm came to the throne at the early age of twenty-nine in 1888 as King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany. When revolution broke out in Germany in 1918, Wilhelm II fled through Belgium to The Netherlands, a neutral country during World War I.

On 10 November 1918 he arrived at the Dutch border and entered the country with the permission and consent of Queen Wilhelmina and the Dutch government. When he walked into Kasteel Amerongen, his new “temporary” home as guest of Count Bentinck, the Kaiser’s first request was, “And now give me a good cup of English tea.” The Emperor who came to tea stayed for eighteen months. In 1919 he finally purchased a charming but small country house nearby called Huis Doorn. The German government of 1920 sent fifty-nine train cars with objects the Kaiser specifically requested. This generous gift composes the collection of Huis Doorn. It is almost entirely still intact.

In the late 1970s I embarked upon my long friendship with Huis Doorn. After my first visit, I thought about how close the Kaiser was to me in terms of links in a human chain. In 1963, when I graduated from Trinity College, Hartford, Mr. Eugen Eisenlohr and his wife gave me a present that I still have. It is a French genre painting signed and dated 1860 by Jules-Salles Wagner. Kaiser Wilhelm II had given this painting to Mr. Eisenlohr’s father who had been one of the Kaiser’s personal physicians up to the end of World War I. The realization that the Kaiser was but two people away from me was stunning. The painting compressed the distance in time separating me from Germany’s last emperor, and brought him to life for me. My mother never mentioned the painting’s provenance. Among the 78 rpm-recordings from her mother’s house were many World War I songs. My favorite was: “We’ll drown old Bill the Kaiser in a bottle of Budweiser.”

Later, upon two occasions, I became only one person away from the Kaiser. Huis Doorn's Director, Theo Bijleveld (a former Mayor of Rhenen), arranged for Jonkheer Teixeira de Mattos to visit Doorn in 1978. This former Dutch military officer befriended the Kaiser during his exile, and returned especially to see the uniforms that were still at Huis Doorn. It was an emotional visit for the jonkheer. He was of Portuguese Jewish descent and for obvious reasons did not attend the Kaiser's funeral and burial at Huis Doorn in 1941. Watching this elderly gentleman march into the Emperor's mausoleum (opened for him), click his heels, touch his right hand to his forehead in an imperial salute, and bow before the flag-draped sarcophagus of Germany's last emperor is something I will never forget. Earlier that day, when he noticed a brown spot on one of the white lapels of a military tunic, Teixeira swept away a tear. He told us that he had been present when "His Majesty spilled some coffee on that lapel." Teixeira's memorable visit was the beginning of a project to thoroughly catalogue the Emperor's uniforms and their accoutrements.

Secondly, I met at Huis Doorn an elderly lady who lived in a flat above the garages. She had lived there many years, having begun her long service as a young girl. She told me that servants were told to hide if they heard or saw the Kaiser coming because His Majesty did not like to see servants about. She remembered being in the main hall once when she heard him coming down the stairs. Hiding behind the curtains to the left of the front doors, she stood mute as the curtain was slowly drawn back. The Emperor smiled and said, "Little girl, old German Emperors do not eat children."

Through these two people, from very different backgrounds, I caught a glimpse not of the "Emperor," but of Wilhelm the man. Yes. History is far closer to us than we often realize.

When crossing the threshold at Huis Doorn, one is immediately welcomed into a long vanished world captured as though in fast-freeze. The rooms tell the story of the actual end of the Ancien Régime in Europe. The loud, messy and boisterous French Revolution was but a prelude. The demise of the most exclusive club the world has ever seen is quietly embodied in Huis Doorn, one of the last surviving examples in Europe of an imperial household. For the exiled Wilhelm, Doorn was a painfully modest residence. It gently highlights the pathos of what for Wilhelm were "the remains of the day." Each room has something to say. Photographs, mementos from trips, furniture, paintings, objets d'art, books, bibelots (costly or cheap), clothing and their accoutrements, provide countless facets to the prism of the Kaiser's personality. Every object plays a rôle and together they make Huis Doorn the lead actor. Context is the fragile reality that keeps history alive.

It is no exaggeration to call it "miraculous" that the house and collection have remained basically intact and pristine. However, "It was a close-run thing, a damn close-run thing." This terse, but honest summation by the Duke of Wellington on the precariousness of battle (Waterloo) applies to Huis Doorn, and its often-uncertain survival as a cultural treasure. From 1941, the year of the Kaiser's death, to 1945, the Nazis occupied The Netherlands and protected the house. They could have easily emptied it and ended a spellbinding story. They

did not. In 1945 Huis Doorn was confiscated by the Dutch State as the property of an alien enemy and stood in limbo. This ended in 1953 when Huis Doorn was opened as a museum under the auspices of the Stichting tot Beheer van Huis Doorn (The Foundation for the Administration of Huis Doorn).

In 2010, in my covering letter to the evaluation report on Huis Doorn, commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, I stated, “The Ministry is to be congratulated for returning to its support of such a momentous source of historic documentation as Huis Doorn.” Regrettably, in just two short years, many things changed. A new government came into power and requested advice on Doorn, and other institutions, from the Raad voor Cultuur, or Culture Board, in The Hague. The Culture Board determined that Huis Doorn has nothing to do with The Netherlands, with the Dutch, and with significant history. The Board’s selective, pathetically shortsighted, xenophobic, and ill-informed verdict, along with its ruthless budget-slashing recommendations for Huis Doorn, are in perfect harmony with the troubling trend in The Netherlands to scuttle all but the largest and most well established cultural behemoths.

To say that the last residence of the last German Kaiser is outside the historical purview of The Netherlands would be risible if it were not so ludicrous. A German-British emperor, with deep Dutch dynastic ties, got into hot water far above his head. Like Humpty Dumpty, the Kaiser took a great fall, while millions of others – swept up into his dreams of grandeur, dominance, and glory – died. Most probably to his surprise, he fatefully ended up in The Netherlands, of all places. He brought global history with him, which became part of Dutch history in the process. He might have been hanged as a war criminal had he not been saved by Queen Wilhelmina and the Dutch government. Prince Willem-Alexander, the heir to the Dutch throne, is the present “Prince of Orange,” a title previously held by the Kaiser. Alleging, as the Culture Board has, that Huis Doorn has nothing to do with Dutch history is to say that the Dutch have nothing to do with European history, or World history, or even with their own history – three degrees and counting, to the negative.

As for Doorn’s future, it is a fact that cultural programs often serve as the proverbial “usual suspects” for budget cutbacks. Doorn’s annual budget shortfall is approximately €200,000.00. Sufficient time has not even been given to Eymert-Jan Goossens, Director of Huis Doorn, to fully implement the plans to increase revenue as outlined in the 2010 evaluation report. Progress, however, has been made. Much more can be made if Goossens is given a proper chance to do so. Meanwhile, the Dutch government spends some €10.5 million a year in overtime pay for police to maintain public order at soccer games, incurring expenses that should be passed on to the sports moghuls. Such skewed priorities do not bode well for the preservation of Dutch history.

Good history makes for a good story. Most people like a good story. Huis Doorn has a titanic tale to tell; it is a panoramic saga. It the tragedy of excessive power and privilege; overwhelming and preening hubris; arrogant stupidity; life-lasting effects of parental neglect/disdain/and misguided best intentions; life-lasting effects of physical disabilities; a gluttony of over-achievement that left most

people who came into contact with it, directly or indirectly, surfeited and disgusted, and, as time passed, simply dead; the mediocrity of mediocre minds and what that means when such “minds” are in charge of human destinies on a vast scale; the loneliness of total failure on a grand stage and the time to ponder it; the foolish and cloying hope that the father’s failure could be made right by the eldest son’s possible chance of returning to the German throne (Crown Prince Wilhelm 1882-1952); the sadness of dreams not realized and lessons not learned.

Such a monumental drama about how world history can be shaped and changed forever by a rather average man needs a Tolstoy or a Pasternak to do it justice. Perhaps the very greatness of the story is why the Dutch cultural policy gurus in The Hague have trouble fathoming its significance.