

## 11. A Dutch 'Mountain' Then and Now: March 20-21

I did some Googling a few days ago in order to satisfy my curiosity as to what had become of the Filipsberg (“Philip's Mountain”) where back in my childhood years my family spent part of the summer vacation. This was our cottage country then, as close as we could get to a wilderness of sorts in the Netherlands. As I recalled in my memoirs, the woods and the heath fields were our playground for two magical weeks, and since my grandparents would spend a great part of the summer there in their own cottage, there was plenty of opportunity to visit there regularly on the weekends, for it was not a very long bicycle ride to get there. Sometimes we would take the bus, which would deposit us at the bottom of the 'berg', and from there it would be a long walk uphill. It was a gravel road then, and so we would be enveloped in a cloud of dust whenever a car passed us; I imagine—the Googling did not provide me with this information—that the road has long since been paved.

The Filipsberg is a northern spur of the Veluwe, a large—at least by Dutch standards—region of hills, woodlands and heath fields in the central Netherlands, outdoors and cottage country par excellence already since the early decades of the last century. It was the supreme summer playground for myself and my brothers and sisters. The very basic amenities of our cottage—oil lamps instead of electric lights and water from the pump, an outhouse toilet—gave our stays there an extra edge of adventure, of “roughing in the bush,” to use the Canadian expression. For mom and dad and for opa and oma, too, it was all about relaxation, but for us siblings from morning till evening it was all about play—climbing trees above all, the large majority of them evergreens with branches close together and starting close to the ground, which made climbing higher and higher a cinch. We would dare each other to climb higher and higher; it is a miracle that no one ever had a bad fall. Opa and oma loved to walk, and would go for long hikes at times, and the older ones of us would be invited to join them. They were very knowledgeable about edible mushrooms, and under their careful supervision we, too, would pick them.

One incident has resurfaced in my mind. One day, walking along a sandy path through a far-stretching heath field, I and a few of my brothers and sisters—I am sure it included Gerrit, Lida, and Baldwin—spotted a large shiny object close to the edge of our path. It must have been at least half a foot in length, cylinder-shaped and of metal glittering bright in the summer-sun. We examined it more closely, but had the—thank God!—good sense not to touch, let alone move it; it looked menacing and that kept us from getting too close. We told mom and dad, and they reported it to the manager of the camp ground, who in turn—he and his wife had a telephone in their centrally located home—contacted the local police. We heard later that the object had been very carefully removed; the word “granaat” (“grenade”) was used, but I now believe—for the thing was way too big and heavy to be a hand-thrown grenade—that it was a small explosive but unexploded shell, not the residue of World War II fighting (as we thought at the time) but misfired from a large army firing range near the small town of Wapenveld (“Weapons Field”) about fifteen kilometres away.

Googling revealed there is still a *vakantiepark* on the heights of the Filipsberg but, not surprisingly, everything now is ultra-modern. The website showed a cottage called the *zonnestulpje* (“sun cottage”) the same name as that of the cottage, which was our vacation home more than six decades ago; it is reasonable to assume the “sun cottage” occupies the site of its antique predecessor. The huge plate glass window of what must be its living room testified to its modernity, and it must have come with all the amenities expected by today's vacationer, including television, telephone, wifi, and a contemporary bathroom and kitchen.

Googling also brought a minor disappointment. As a child I had soon learned that the *bergen* of my fatherland were of a completely different order than the mountains of, say, Switzerland. However, I assumed—and continued to assume until just now—that, by Dutch standards, the height of the Filipsberg was impressive, at least 100 metres above sea-level, taller than the tower of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Catholic Church of the Blessed Lady in the heart of Zwolle. More than once I had climbed the tower's stairway up to the balustrade near the top, and was awed by the magnificent view of Zwolle and the surrounding countryside to be had from there. However, now I know that the Filipsberg has only a mere 50 metres.

The Veluwe, which has a large—again, by Dutch standards—national park at its centre, speaks of the passion of today's Dutch to preserve and conserve the best of their country's natural environment, a major challenge for one of the most densely populated countries of the world. Despite the inevitable encroachments of urbanization on its periphery—the big highways, the railways, and the strands of cities and towns—the region has retained much of its pristine aspect. In fact, the Dutch pride themselves of having added several hundreds of thousands of acres of woodland to their countryside since WWII, a period during which the population of the country nearly doubled. One is spared there the sight of the huge scars inflicted on the landscape by so-called clear-cutting, the cutting down of wide strips of forest, all of these to be fed into the maw of the forestry industry. Of this one sees all too much in many parts of Canada, including my own province of Nova Scotia. By far the worst of this practice I saw a few years ago on Vancouver Island as I was driving with a friend due west from the Strait of Georgia to the Pacific Ocean: almost entire mountain sides denuded of their forests with everywhere wide gashes of bare rock and soil and tree stumps running down from high up to the base. True, this is no longer permitted on many stands of so-called old-growth forests which may go back for centuries in time, and the 'new' forests which are cut down must be replaced with seedlings, so that a new crop of trees will grow to maturity, and yes, the cycle of clear-cutting and replanting may start all over again. In sharp contrast, the motto of the coat of arms of the Netherlands, *Je Maintiendrai*, seems to me to have a new contemporary relevance.