

## 20. A Vast Grey Sea: July 5-7

A vivid memory from my childhood puzzled me for years and for this reason I did not include it in my memoirs. Another reason, perhaps even more important, is that what this memory brought before mental eye was not particularly eventful. Nothing happens: I just see stretched in the distance before me a vast expanse of water, very grey under an overcast sky. A true sea, you might say, but the odd thing is that I am not standing at the edge of the water but seem to see it from a distance and my view of it is hemmed in as though I am looking through a small window. I now think I have finally solved the puzzle. First of all, it is not a true sea, but the IJsselmeer, the large freshwater lake that was created almost 90 years ago when the so-called Zuiderzee (South Sea), the wide bay of the North Sea which reached far into the heart of Holland and which at times of high tides and violent storms was liable to cause major flooding, was closed off from the sea with the so-called Afsluitdijk (Enclosing Dam), and subsequently over the following five decades the largest polders ever in Dutch history were reclaimed from the water.

I have reasoned that I must have first seen the IJsselmeer in the late-forties or early fifties when my family had a car—the car of the family business for which my dad working as a sales representative travelling all over the Netherlands. It must have been during a family outing while dad was driving the car along a dike road not far from the water. We may have stopped for a few minutes to get a good, leisurely view. The weather must have been inclement; otherwise I imagine we would have gotten out the car for a while. This, then, must have been the 'sea' which forever imprinted itself on my memory.

I did not get to see a real sea, the North Sea, until the summer of 1956 when my uncle Dirk (mom's oldest brother) and aunt Jeanne, whom I was visiting in Dordrecht, took me and my cousins Gé and Nelly by car to Holland's premier seaside resort, Scheveningen. It was a beautiful sunny day as we motored along the grand boulevard overlooking the beach and the sea, the unforgettably blue sea now all the more impressive for its spectacular surf.

The vast deep-blue Atlantic followed two years later when in our immigration to Canada my family and I voyaged on the SS Waterman (Dutch for the zodiac sign, Aquarius) from Rotterdam to Montreal; the sheer vastness of the Saint Lawrence River, especially up to Québec City imprinted itself on my memory with equal vividness. For the first decade of my life in Canada, living in Wallaceburg, Ontario halfway between Lake Erie and Lake Huron, the Great Lakes, truly “sweet water seas,” as the French explorers called them centuries ago, made an indelible impression me, joined by Lake Ontario when I lived in Toronto for the next ten years, and briefly during a one-day excursion, by Lake Michigan and the imposing dunes lining its eastern shore—one day I hope to gaze upon Lake Superior in all its magnificent grandeur. I have also been privileged to take in the immense Pacific in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. And for the past thirty-nine years I have been even more privileged living only an hour's drive from the Atlantic, twenty minutes from the Bay of Fundy and only ten minutes from

the latter's easternmost arm, the Minas Basin, both Bay and Basin renowned for the highest tides in the world. The “vast grey sea” as the IJsselmeer appeared to me as a child was therefore but a foretaste of the mighty wonders of nature to follow, and as such it was an image replete with promise and beauty.

The oceans and the seas, saltwater or freshwater, of our planet, and all the millions of lakes and rivers which ultimately flow into them are indeed the supreme natural wonders. The oceans in particular are mighty, for do they not cover three-quarters of our planet? In comparison, the great mountains, imposing and magnificent though they are, appear but as excrescences, afterthoughts one might say, on the Earth's surface. Oceans, seas, lakes, and rivers are primal, for did life not first appear in them? In fact, in the opening verse of the Book of Genesis, we read that, long before the instant of Creation, on the “void,” and “formless” Earth, “with darkness over the face of the abyss,” “a mighty wind swept over the surface of the waters.” Water, therefore, is truly primal; as the Greek poet Pindar put it 2500 years ago right at the beginning of the first of his *Olympian Odes*, “Water is best.”

Now in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the state of the oceans and the seas and indeed of all of our planet's waters has thrust humankind into an unprecedented crisis of survival. Rising sea-levels due to human-accelerated climate warming and the despoliation of the Earth's waters—oceans, seas, lakes, and rivers alike—through massive pollution and over-fishing have led us into this grave predicament. It is good to see, and even reassuring, that nations as diverse as Canada and the Netherlands, and now virtually all countries, are taking bold measures to stave off what would otherwise be the inevitable disaster. During my recent visits to Holland I have seen rivers restored almost to their pristine state and teeming again with fish and hundreds of wind-turbines rising out of the waters of the IJsselmeer and the North Sea. Canada, with its vast land and water masses, has also begun to rise to the challenge. I like to think that that in future retrospect the pushback by the Trump regime will be viewed as a momentary blip, and that through God's Grace, a resolve born of understanding and wisdom will prevail.