

Johan Steenbergen, the Man

Talk for the International Ihagee/Exakta Convention Dresden 2012-09-17 by *Hugo D. Ruys*

1. Youth in Meppel, The Netherlands 1886-1908

Johan was born in the town of Meppel, as son of Jan Steenbergen and Sophie Brümmer, who married in 1882. Jan Steenbergen owned and ran a textile shop on Hoofdstraat (Main Street), with a branch in Zwolle. To avoid all misunderstandings: he had no other shops.



Parents Jan Steenbergen and Sophie Brümmer



Sister Wilhelmine, brother Hermann Dietrich, Johan himself

Johan didn't do very well at school. He absolutely didn't want to learn what he thought to be unnecessary things. In this he wasn't perfect, because his German was particularly bad! During his last year at school in 1904 his father died. Because of this handicap he was slightly helped to pass his examinations.



His family and particularly his father always expected Johan to succeed his father as shop manager, although he had a brother, Hermann Dietrich, and also a sister, Wilhelmine. He actually worked in the shop for some time, but was totally uninterested. He had a feeling for business but was interested in quite different products: gramophones, cameras and chemicals. So he founded his own shop around the corner, on Keutelstege. This name sounds in Dutch like "Droppings alley". The official address however (and maybe for this reason) was Main Street. The Steenbergen Foundation

owns a box with a lens set, carrying the name of Steenbergen's shop. I have here a drop plate camera with the same nameplate. Those are the only items from his shop we have ever seen.



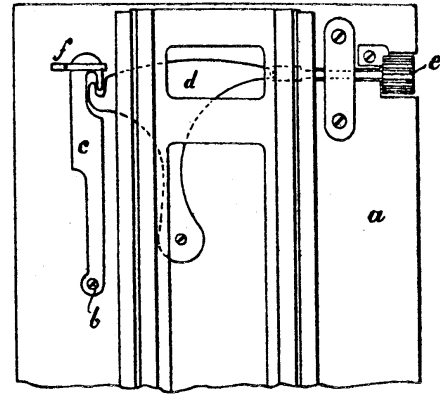
2 The Start: Dresden 1908-1918

Johan's mother and his guardian (uncle Jan Eilmann) decided to send him to Dresden, to the Taylor's Academy. The year is uncertain. In one of Johan Steenbergen's letters he wrote that he went to Dresden one year before he founded Ihagee, i.e. in 1911, not 1908. Within three months he left the Taylor's Academy. He hated "those squatting people", he wrote and joined Ernemann as a volunteer.

Already in 1910 he registered his First and best known patent, the one for unlocking the double extension Block on bellows cameras. Hence the later Patent Duplex camera from



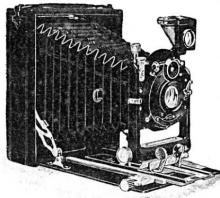
Ihagee. The drawing is quite different from the construction actually used in the cameras, but I was told that the text in a patent is what matters; the drawings are just possibilities. We don't know how he met Ludwig Löschau, but he clearly bought the contents of Löschau's bankrupt camera



company.

On the 13th of May 1912 he founded the Industrie- und Handelsgesellschaft G.m.b.H., starting with Löschau's materials and financial support from his mother. The name, as we know, was soon abbreviated into Ihagee.

Der Photorex



D.R.P. u. D.R.G.M.
ist durch die in ihm vereinigten neuzeitlichen Erfindungen
die vollendetste Klappkamera der Gegenwart

In the beginning Löschau worked at Ihagee, but Johan was quite unhappy with his sloppy work and camera parts. The first year resulted in a financial loss, but the next year was better. To me, the loss was at least partly caused by the expensive design of the

first Ihagee camera, the Photorex. The First World War was a severe handicap for Ihagee. It was finally dissolved on the 18th of October 1918.

Der bei der Gründung unserer Gesellschaft angemeldete Name

PHOTOREX

ist uns vom Patentamt nicht erteilt worden.

Wir bringen unsere Präzisions-Kamera - Fabrikate nunmehr unter dem Namen

PHOTOKLAPP

in den Handel und bitten unsere geehrten Abnehmer, unserem Fabrikat unter der neuen Bezeichnung das gleiche Interesse entgegen zu bringen.

3 Growth & Greatness 1918-1940 Ihagee Kamerawerk Steenbergen & Co

Very soon - the 16th of November 1914 - Ihagee was back in town. This time Steenbergen started the new company together with six "woodworkers", people who were familiar with the production of wooden cameras. We already knew for many years that one of them,

Emil English, had until then his own camera company, but only recently I found out where the others came from. This became clear from two letters in the archive of the Steenbergen Foundation. I know now that all of them worked previously at Ernemann, and had left that business in 1914 to establish the Emil English company, so it was all six of them, not English alone. During the war Steenbergen and English had many contacts and did



business mutually. Steenbergen appreciated the knowledge and technical experience of the woodworkers, they recognised his capacities as entrepreneur and salesman. At war's end English was about bankrupt, so the new Ihagee was an improvement to all parties. Emil Kirsch left the group in 1927. That's why later photos, like the one shown here, show Steenbergen with only five woodworkers.

Because Ihagee was growing rapidly, Steenbergen finally bought a rather large property at Schandauer Strasse from the Dutch company Schaap & Co. He also bought the contents of that company and absorbed it. Privately he lived in two rented rooms in Marchnerstrasse 4. That house doesn't exist any more. His niece Fiet Dijkers visited him in those years. See Günter Eiselt's film *Exakta, The rise and fall of a legendary camera*.



In his biography "Johan Steenbergen, de lachende (= laughing) diplomaat" his character in early days is described as follows: hidden tension/nervousness, closed, good intellect, practical, interest in technical matters, managing capacities, vital, energetic, ambitious, wants to be number one, clearly present, the boss, no team worker. May years later he had changed and was seen as: good-natured, jovial, working power, many interests, sometimes fierce, story teller with the presentation better than the point, not many friends, level not impressive. Werner Wurst, his publicity manager for many years, described him as: good salesman, bright, honest, good relationships with everybody, economical. "He always came to the factory by bicycle and did all advertising himself until I took over". The Dutch photographer, publisher and author Adriaan Boer

described Steenbergen as follows: energetic, indestructible optimistic, nose for demands of the market.

In Germany of his time it was very important for people in business to have a title, dr., prof., etc. Steenbergen hadn't any. So it was quite useful to him that The Netherlands asked him in 1929 to be honorary consul in Dresden. He was Herr Konsul now.

In October 1930 he married Elizabeth Louisa Nussbaum, born in San Francisco. Her father, Moritz Nussbaum, was university professor. Her mother, Kate Sutro, came from a rich family.

Kate's father was a business man and mayor of San Francisco. Johan and Liss first moved to a house in Dresden north of the river Elbe, then found an impressive house at Justinen Strasse.



The time in Schandauer Strasse was the top of his career. Even royalty paid attention to his company. Prince Hendrik of The Netherlands, consort of queen Wilhelmina, visited the Ihagee factory in 1930. This was duly reported in the newspapers. At the end of the 1930's his factory at Schandauer Strasse employed at least 500 men and women. That's why he called it "The House of Thousand"(hands). Johan travelled all over the world to visit his representatives in many countries.

4. World War II



Nazi Germany invaded The Netherlands on May 10th 1940. So Johan and his wife had become enemies now; they were interned for a short period but then released. Steenbergen went to his factory every day, but wasn't allowed access to the production facilities. He started to try and transfer money to The Netherlands but that was difficult from the beginning. In August 1941 the factory management was officially taken over by a Nazi agent

as controller.

To avoid more problems Steenbergen split his business in two different companies. We would call them Investment and Production companies now. Then, because his wife was Jewish, he considered it wise to leave the country. He never saw Dresden and his company again!

Via Holland he travelled to the USA, with scarcely any money. He was received politely by the Dutch ambassador in New York, but got no financial support at all. On their way back, on foot, to their temporary premises Johan remarked to his wife "Liss, we should be happy. It can't become worse than this".

Luckily they could borrow money from the rich family of Liss, so all went well after a short time.

In his American period Steenbergen was very active. He followed courses English, accounting and business correspondence, and became honorary consul again, now in the USA. He corresponded untiring with a lot of companies inside and outside the USA, trying to prepare for the post-war period and to find a partner to produce "his" Exakta again. This was very time consuming but unsuccessful.

In the last months of the war he was informed that his beautiful factory in Dresden had been completely destroyed by allied bombing.

5 Second life 1945-1961



In November 1945 Steenbergen was appointed Dutch military attaché in the French zone of Germany. He had never been in the military service, but now became colonel, with an impressive cap with a red ribbon. Later he told that he never exactly knew who to salute, so he sometimes saluted the hall porters of hotels.

Steenbergen was not happy to be appointed in the French zone. His French was very limited - he sometimes simulated it to be zero - but of course he preferred the US zone, being closer to East Germany where his factory had been. When it became clear that this wasn't possible, his French improved.

His company was nearly taken over by the Russian occupational force, but he now of course knew the right people to avoid this. The Dutch government took steps to make clear that Ihagee was the property of an ally and couldn't be absorbed by the USSR (and later the DDR, the German Democratic Republic).

His wife came over from the USA but now in bad health. She had had a broken leg and suffered from a brain haemorrhage and Alzheimer. She died in September 1948. Steenbergen's mother died soon after that in January 1949.

Then his career took a new turn. In 1950 Steenbergen was appointed consul of The Netherlands (professional, not honorary) in Hanover, quite a large city. This became official in 1951 when The Netherlands recognised the Bundes Republik Deutschland. Steenbergen enjoyed his job in Hanover very much, so he was very disappointed when the consulate in Hanover was shut down in 1954. He was offered a new job as consul in Emden, in his view an unimportant and dull town in the north east, near Holland.

Soon however he changed his view and became very involved in his work in Emden. In those years the Dutch and German fishermen, together using the Dollart as fishing grounds, quarrelled much over the fishing rights and the exact position of the border line, the Dutch still hating the Germans so short after WWII. Steenbergen invited representatives of both sides several times in his house, served them a couple of drinks and then left them to find out that the others were humans too, and making agreements over fishing season etc. was really rather easy. Steenbergen was more and



more involved in public relations, accepted invitations for an endless line of dinners, lunches, cocktail parties and more official tasks. He was a well accepted person but didn't have close friends. Steenbergen was also officially appreciated. He became Officer in the

Order of Oranje Nassau in 1961 (Dutch) and also received the Bundeskreuz (German). His nephew Hein Ehrhardt, former chairman of the Steenbergen Foundation, visited his uncle regularly. Steenbergen was telling him about his Ihagee all the time, and Ehrhardt later regretted strongly that he didn't listen very well in those years. But he remembered clearly that uncle Johan had never accepted the loss of his company in Dresden, and not really believed in the future of Ihagee West.

6 Last years 1961-1967

Steenbergen remained consul in Emden until March 1961, nearly 75 years old. He was angry that he was "fired" by a minister of state, not by the queen who had appointed him. He also was very disappointed about the end of his second career and continued to help his successor for several years with representation tasks.

The photo industry didn't forget his achievements, In 1962 – 50 Years Ihagee – there were several full page articles in Der Fotohändler, and also articles in Dutch photo magazines.



In 1964 Steenbergen moved to the village of Niederstütter, very isolated and unhappy. In 1965 he moved to Osnabrück where he died on March 7, 1967. He was well remembered by his former partners and employees. He corresponded with several of them and even with some of their widows. His death was covered in lots of articles in German Newspapers and photographic magazines. He

was buried in the Nussbaum family grave in Bonn.

7 My involvement?

Now what do I have to do personally with all this? I am an active collector of all Ihagee and related products, documents and information for over 40 years now. But most remarkable is the photo I found in the Steenbergen Stichting archive. It shows 5 five important looking men visiting Steenbergen. The most important one



would think is the man next to Steenbergen himself. This person is *my father*. Later I found out, with the help of Steenbergen's visitors' book, that my father, together with his boss, the mayor of Amsterdam, visited consul Steenbergen in Hanover on the 9th of September 1961. I was 13 years old at the time and don't remember my father telling about this ☹.

8 Steenbergen alive.

In the lecture I ran a file with Steenbergen speaking during a radio interview at the occasion of the end of his career as consul in Emden, so you can hear his voice. See/hear it partly at www.ihagee.org/Dresden2012/JSvoice.avi. You have to copy this into your web browser.

I have also shown a short video showing consul Steenbergen in his Emden time. See it at www.ihagee.org/Dresden2012/JSvideo.avi. Copy this into your web browser. Wait until the fishing boat disappears.