

Hein Ehrhardt 328 (Hon)

(Much has been written, not least by our own researcher Peter Longden, about the early life of Johan Steenbergen up to the time when he escaped to America in the face of the Nazi party in 1942. But little, perhaps nothing, other than the biography by Hein Ehrhardt has covered his subsequent life. We are very pleased therefore to be able to present these reminiscences of Steenbergen's later years, and our grateful thanks go to the author and to Hugo Ruys, on whose website they first appeared and who freely gave permission for us to reproduce them here—Ed.)

HUGO RUYS ASKED ME to write my personal reminiscences of Johan Steenbergen for his website. Although it is difficult for me to decide which part of my own memories are of real interest to Exakta collectors, I have tried to make a survey of what might be of importance and, as far I remember correctly, what happened about fifty years ago. It is well known that time is not always kind to the accuracy of memory.

I first considered as a possible title of this text *My Uncle and I*, as a persiflage of *The King and I*, but I am quite sure that he wouldn't have appreciated a title like that. He was extremely good at joking about himself, but joking about him by others was a slightly different matter. So it is *My Uncle Johan Steenbergen*.

First a summarized description of the life of Johan Steenbergen. He was born in 1886 in the small town of Meppel in the province of Drenthe in the northern Netherlands. His father Jan Steenbergen was the owner of a draper's shop there, as well as another in Zwolle. There were thirteen drapers in Meppel; Steenbergen's ranked among the first five. Johan's mother was the intelligent, business-like, reserved, German-born Sophie C.M. Brümmer. I remember especially her keen eyes.

Johan's father died suddenly when Johan was eighteen. The same year Johan graduated from secondary school. For the first three years he worked in the family shop in Meppel and during that time he started a business selling gramophones and photographic and chemical materials. In 1908 he went to Dresden and chose photography as a goal for life. Four years later he founded the Ihagee Kamerawerk GmbH. With a short interruption during WWI, this firm was to be his life's work until some time in WWII.

In 1928 he was appointed by Her Majesty Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands as honorary consul of our country in Dresden. In 1931 he married the German-American Elizabeth Nussbaum. The Nussbaums were a distinguished Jewish family; Elizabeth's maternal grandfather was Adolph de Sutro, a famous mayor of San Francisco. Johan and Elizabeth had no children.

The years of the Interbellum were years full of success, happiness and glory: his marriage, the consulate, and most importantly Ihagee's becoming world-famous through the Exakta, the fantastic invention of Karl Nüchterlein. But at the end of the thirties the situation changed; threats of the persecution of the Jews and of the coming of WWII were hanging as dark clouds over those years. Soon after the German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940 Johan lost control of his factory. Later, in 1942, he was able to escape from Germany, thanks to the fact that Elizabeth had an American passport. The couple went to the USA, where Johan was appointed consul in San Francisco: honorary again, third in command.

After WWII Steenbergen was not allowed by the Allied authorities to return to Dresden, and he stayed in Dutch governmental service. He became head of the Dutch military mission in the French Occupation zone with the rank of colonel, and was later Consul in several German cities. The last two posts he held were Hanover, until 1954, and Emden, until his retirement in 1961. He continued living in Emden for some years after his retirement.

He had been a widower since 1948; his mother had died in 1949. He had one brother, Hermann D. Steenbergen, who died as a war victim during the German occupation of the Netherlands in WWII, and one sister, Wilhelmine M.A. Steenbergen, who married Jacob (Jaap) J. Dijkers, later a rear-admiral in the Royal Netherlands Navy. More distantly related was Johan's uncle Geert Steenbergen, of whom my brother and I are the only grandchildren. Johan had no other uncles or aunts with offspring. Even the distant family was very small. So my mother was a Steenbergen and a first cousin of Johan, and that is where I come in.

When I was born in 1926 on Zuid-Beveland, then one of the more southerly islands of the Netherlands but nowadays connected by dams and bridges to the mainland, where my father was the postmaster, there was in fact hardly any contact with Johan in Dresden. I wonder whether he was informed about my birth. Relations with the other members of that branch of the family were warmer. I remember Aunt Sophie, Aunt Wilhelmine and Uncle Hermann turning up at the seventieth birthday of my grandmother Steenbergen in 1932. The only thing I knew about Johan was that there was a kind of an uncle in Dresden who had a camera factory and who, on the occasion of the visit of Queen Wilhelmina's consort to the factory, had presented a camera for Crown Princess Juliana. An often repeated story. (It is worth mentioning that the camera was indeed used by H.R.H.; it was sent in for maintenance every year till WWII).

Then the situation changed. My father died in 1938 and my mother, my grandmother, my brother and I went to live in Delft, where my brother started studying at the Technical University. About the same time Rear-Admiral Dijkers left active service abroad and went to live in The Hague, a city almost within walking distance of Delft. So the cousins Wilhelmine Dijkers and Nora Ehrhardt and their families lived not far from each other, and immediately the contacts became close and cordial again. When Johan and Elizabeth were in the Netherlands in spring 1942 to bid farewell to Johan's mother and family in The Hague before leaving for the United States, they paid a visit to my mother in Delft. That was the first time I ever saw Johan. It is remarkable that the German authorities granted permission to Johan and his Jewish wife for such a visit to occupied Holland.

I remember that visit very clearly. We were living quite peacefully, my widowed mother with her mother and her two sons. The consequences of the war were not hard for us in its early years. Life was not very eventful. So the visit of Uncle Johan and Aunt Lizz was something special. It was a quiet, sunny day. A rather plump couple, who paid a kind of courtesy call—tea of course and hardly anything else as was the habit in those years. People coming from another world and going to another world, just for a moment parachuted in. No emotions were shown, no kissing. I never saw Aunt Lizz again.

But Johan came safely back to Europe after WWII, and in his first posting as colonel in the French occupation zone he often came to The Hague to see his family, and during those visits we also saw him frequently in Delft. My brother and I became better acquainted with him. Full colonel in uniform, joking a great deal about his high military status: a remarkable position for a man who had no affinity with the military world, which as a consequence he did not take very seriously. He was always telling jokes about some amusing experience he had had, mostly exaggerated and only partly true. His main story at that time was that he had asked whom he should salute first. The instruction had been, only those who have a red ribbon around their cap. So he ceremoniously saluted the doorman of a hotel who wore such a cap. People generally liked his jokes, at least partly because he could laugh at himself so contagiously. He often told his funny stories to break the ice when visitors arrived.

Aunt Lizz came over after some time, very ill, from San Francisco, and died in 1948. As sometimes happened in those years she was at first treated in Germany by a fake doctor, who was not qualified at all.

Then there were some changes. Johan was appointed to the first of his several consular posts in Germany, and I had finished my studies in civil engineering at the

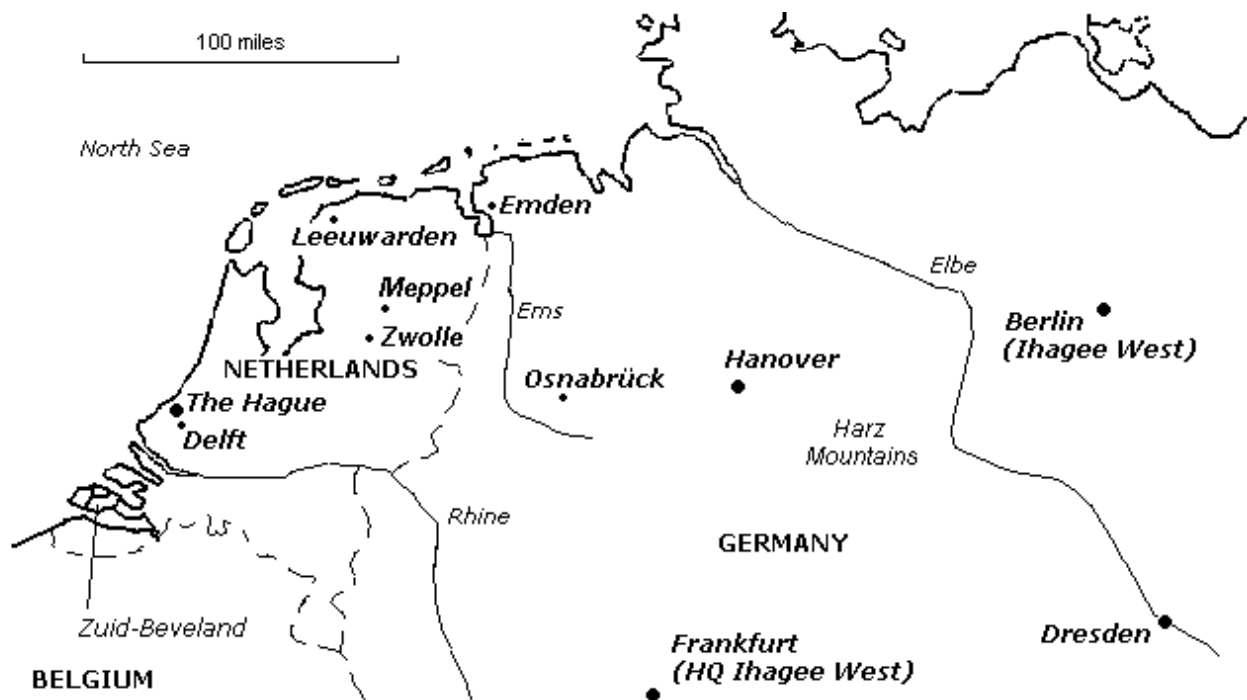
Technical University of Delft. I had got a job in the public works department of the province of Friesland in the northern part of the Netherlands, and moved to Leeuwarden, the provincial capital.

In 1953 my mother and I received an invitation to visit Johan Steenberg for Whitsuntide in Hanover, where he resided as Consul of the Netherlands. It was the first time I had seen him in office and as host, and I was impressed. He was living in a magnificent pre-war house with a beautiful garden. Two very dedicated maid-servants; one of them mainly for the cooking (excellent) and one more especially for housekeeping tasks, like serving at dinner, answering the doorbell. All the other housework they did together. The furniture in the house was a rather mixed lot of some of his old furniture from Dresden that somehow had been transported to West Germany, furniture of his late mother, and a number of things he had bought from his predecessor in Hanover.

We toured through the Harz with some of his friends. As hardly more than a student I did not always applaud automatically the things he said or pointed out, as all the other guests used to do. Even years later he brought up, not entirely amused, my negative comments on the town hall of the city of Hanover. But what I remember most of that first visit was his impressive warm charisma. We got on well, and my mother enjoyed the trip too.

A comment of the housekeepers in later years on the Hanover period was that Johan went out often in the evening with his second-in-command, went to bed at five and was relaxed in his office at eight. He must have been very strong and needed little sleep. I have the impression that he was happy in Hanover. He was socially very active.

Then something unexpected happened. Johan was transferred in 1954 to Emden, a harbour town near the Dutch-German border. There were great difficulties in that region between the Germans and the Dutch about the exact border in the estuary of the river Ems between the two countries. It was a matter of great concern, for which our government needed a reliable man on the spot. At first Johan did not like the remote, ruined city of Emden, still suffering from the damage done in WWII by allied air raids and situated in a very backward rural area. But soon he felt very much at home there.



The Netherlands and north-western Germany, to show the places mentioned in the text

I was still working and living alone in Leeuwarden and so was Uncle Johan in Emden, only a short distance away, so I started to visit him fairly often. A good friendship developed, even with all the distance between generations usual in those years. A warm uncle-nephew contact. Family ties were important for him; he was very close to his sister, his nearest relative in that period, and her family. He was cherishing the memory of his wife, his mother and his brother Hermann.

What was the position of my uncle in Emden in those years? He was popular and well-known; he intervened in conflicts between the two countries in that part of Germany and north-east Holland, and restored normal relations with great success. He was accepted by the Germans as partly one of them, since he had owned an important industry in East Germany and had lost it. The story goes that he was asked sometimes to be a mediator in local conflicts in his domain. An element in that must have been that in remote, ruined, post-war Emden a man of his international experience and quality must have been a rare phenomenon.

He maintained contact with a large number of people in the region and received them in his house for endless dinners, lunches and cocktail parties. His parties in honour of the Queen's birthday were highlights in the Emden of the nineteen-fifties and early sixties. In that period and region they were a novelty. He enjoyed having guests. Dinners ended always with a short slide-show to give the guests the opportunity to sleep for a moment. He was very alert not to invite persons with a Nazi background. The ladies from Hanover continued to take care of him in Emden.

I consider it impressive that he managed after the war, nearing sixty, to build a new career. In the opinion of some well-informed people his achievements in Hanover and Emden were of hardly less importance than those in pre-war Dresden. He was happy, and fond of quite a number of people in Emden. His relationships with the main authorities, the *Regierungspräsident*, the head of the regional government, and the mayor of Emden and the president of the Chamber of Commerce, were more than perfect. He did not have really close personal friends. Somehow he wanted to keep some distance, not to become too closely connected. Once I was asked to become a member of a service club in my home town. His advice was negative: do not become too much involved. Very wise advice, which I did not follow.

He was conservative, in fact liberal (he felt at home with the ideas of the German liberals from the FDP), protestant but not very active in religious matters. Normally he was kind to people. Walking on the walls of Emden once, we met a couple who started to greet him very cordially. My uncle in his dark coat lifted his black hat with a beautiful gesture: "What a pleasure to see you," and so on. Afterwards: "I have no idea who they were." But the couple were very pleased. I practise that system now.

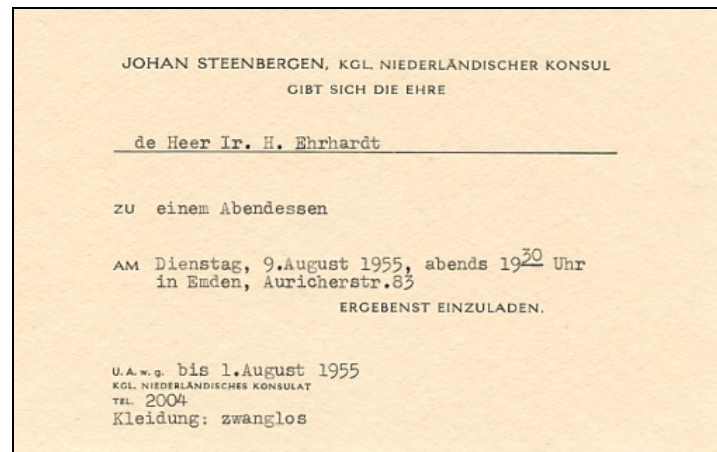
He was not kind to people who did not do their duty. When someone with whom he had to do did something he disapproved of, it took a long time before the relationship was repaired. If ever. He must have been a rather demanding boss. Once he invited the whole family for Christmas and did not even realize that it was not normal for the housekeepers to work at Christmas and not be able to go home. The ladies complained and the problem was solved. "The girls" had by the way a very sharp insight into the family, the characters and the relationships, perhaps more than anyone actually in the Steenberg family ever.

Uncle Johan demanded much of others, but also of himself. He was hardly ever negative about others. But perhaps he was the wise old man, who never comments negatively on anybody.

He was careful in his actions. The year after the construction of the Berlin Wall two friends from Leeuwarden and I planned to make a short trip to Berlin. He was worried; it was dangerous and none of our business. He was absolutely right. We went all the same and came back safely with a number of interesting stories. But perhaps he was also afraid of being involved in incidents.

He was punctilious to the extreme in his financial accounting. He could spend hours searching in his books for the last cents that couldn't be traced back. Painstaking, too, to the last detail. Once I asked him if after half a century in Germany he really needed a German secretary on his staff. "Yes I do," was the answer. "As a foreigner you never learn to write German faultlessly."

He helped people where possible, but as far as I know not very often with money. For example, he sent endless food parcels to his pre-war contacts from Ihagee in Dresden. For his own needs he was also reluctant to spend money.



"Johan Steenbergen, Royal Consul of The Netherlands, has the honour to invite Mr H. Ehrhardt to dinner on Tuesday, 9 August 1955, at 7.30pm in Emden, Aurich Street 83. Please respond by 1 August at the latest to the Royal Dutch Consulate, tel 2004. Dress: casual."

I accompanied him on a number of official social duties, varying from openings of art exhibitions, twinning visits with the Netherlands, visits of naval vessels, to his presiding over the judging of flower parades. He enjoyed those happenings tremendously. Somehow my youthful presence brought something extra. On several occasions a German authority expressed pleasure at seeing a youngster, seldom seen in post-war Germany.

My uncle and I often went for a walk during my visits and we always got lost, because we Steenbergens have no sense of direction. We enjoyed the perfect meals prepared by his cook and we made short trips in my Citroën 2CV through the poor but very unspoilt countryside. We laughed and talked. Uncle Johan certainly showed an interest in my affairs—he organised two study tours in his region for managers and colleagues from my office, and of course they were invited for dinner in his home—but mostly I listened. He once told me about his negotiations, creating the necessary atmosphere for solving the problem of the border in the estuary, and his advances towards the authorities and other local people. Main aspect: never be too close, be hospitable and build contacts.

A topic was always Ihagee, although never photography itself. Although he did not believe in a reunited Germany, he never accepted the loss of Ihagee, not only because he lost so much money, but also because it was his child, a child that came first in his life until the end.

I am not sure whether he expected Ihagee West to be a success. I think it seemed from the beginning to be on the way to failure, and most likely he knew it. Certainly it was difficult for him to accept that Ihagee West was not his own firm. He was always careful not to damage the interests of the company in Dresden, even after the founding of Ihagee West. He talked at length about those negotiations. Now I regret that I do not remember everything he said. A secret diary from that time would have been very useful now.

Johan Steenbergen left Emden in 1964 and died in Osnabrück in 1967, well-looked after by his faithful housekeepers. I visited him several times during his last illness.

I have been asked many times what his influence in my life has been and how he contributed to the making of the kind of man I am now. As may be clear, it was only for a short period that Johan Steenbergen was prominent in my life, and our contacts were certainly not frequent. But I learned very much from him and his behaviour. He certainly belongs among the key figures in my life. I admired him. In those years the community in which I lived was rather restricted; the world of my uncle gave me a broader, refreshing view on life. My professional interest in international organisations for the management of water quality and in travelling was certainly stimulated by what I heard and saw in Emden.

The main point certainly was the importance of establishing and maintaining a network of contacts: how to do that and at the same time the pleasure of doing it. I have practised that the rest of my life, both in my professional and in my social life, making life more comfortable through collecting interesting people around me.

He showed me that it is often wise to hold business meetings at home. There is always less tension there, and the hospitality makes the atmosphere better. I still do that today. And when it is necessary to introduce someone with rank, give them just one level higher: Mr. Director-General for the Director. They are always flattered. And when telling a story, a little gossip, never, never mention the source.

I have used some of his jokes for many years, but I never followed his precise bookkeeping although matters of money are important to me. I never expected that after so many years there should be such a vivid interest in what my beloved uncle has attained. Touching, and giving me a lot of work too.

The history of the charitable *Steenbergen-Stichting* (Steenbergen Foundation) which he founded in 1961 in memory of his brother Hermann, and which I have the pleasure to chair, is another story. If interested see the website <http://www.steenbergen-stichting.nl>



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