

JOHAN STEENBERGEN
Industrialist and diplomat
Meppel 1886 - Osnabrück 1967

By E.H. Halbertsma

BOYHOOD

Johan Steenbergen was born on December 7th, 1886 in Meppel, a small provincial town in the Netherlands. His father Jan belonged to the prosperous middle-class; he possessed textile shops in Meppel and in neighbouring Zwolle. Johan's mother, Sophie Catherine Marie Brümmer, was of German origin; her father was a tradesman in the village of Menslage in the Kingdom of Hanover. Besides Johan, the couple had an elder son (Hermann Diedrich) and a daughter (Wilhelmine Marie Adelheid). In school Johan was a very average pupil. The lessons did not really interest him; he preferred playing outside and, as so many of his contemporaries, he liked making mischief. From an early age he showed commercial talents, buying and selling to his schoolmates.



Johan Steenbergen, aged about 22

Steenbergen's boyhood came to an abrupt end with the death of his father in 1904. In the same year he graduated from the H.B.S. (a secondary school) and started to work in his parents' textile firm. At the same time he started his own business in

photographic materials and gramophones in a storehouse in a street that is now called the Nieuwe Kerkstraat.



Sophie Brümmer and Jan Steenbergen, Johan's parents

The family had planned for Johan to take over his father's business. He, however, did not like this idea at all; he wanted to continue his trade in photographic equipment. His guardian proposed a compromise: Johan was to go to the Schneiderakademie (tailor's academy) in Dresden, Germany. While there, he could also get acquainted with the flourishing, local photo-industry.

Thus Steenbergen moved to Dresden in 1908, at the age of 22. The business in Meppel was liquidated and the premises rented out and later sold.

APPRENTICE YEARS

In the early years of the twentieth century Dresden was renowned for its light industry, amongst which were the many factories producing photographic cameras. Steenbergen soon found a place as a trainee in one of the smaller firms, H. Ernemann A.G. (Ltd). The Schneiderakademie, 'with all those characters at work sitting on tables with their legs crossed' did not appeal to Johan at all!

With great energy and precision Steenbergen started work at Ernemann's, and in a short time he acquired a considerable knowledge of the trade. Two years later he decided it was time for him to go independent.

On May 13th, 1912, Johan Steenbergen, aged 25, founded the 'Industrie und Handelsgesellschaft

m.b.H' (Ltd.) with his mother and himself as shareholders.

His mother furnished the capital; Steenbergen contributed machines and parts, bought from a bankrupt small camera maker. Later, in 1913, the name was changed into 'Ihagee Kamerawerk G.m.b.H'.

After a difficult start, things improved during 1914. Due to stiff competition it was rather difficult to sell cameras in Germany itself, so Ihagee concentrated on the markets abroad. Just when Steenbergen seemed to have overcome the problems of a starting entrepreneur, World War I broke out. The mobilization halted most commercial activity, and financial claims on customers in countries at war with Germany lost their value. Steenbergen was forced to lay off those members of his staff not yet drafted.



In February 1915 Steenbergen was back in business. The annual report even shows a considerable profit for that year. However, after that business declined fast. Therefore the two shareholders decided on October 6th 1918, i.e. just before the armistice on November 11th, to liquidate the company.

IHAGEE KAMERAWERK STEENBERGEN & CO

Defeat and revolution caused big changes in Germany, but Steenbergen continued to work hard for his own business. Surprisingly soon he was in the notary's office to found a new company: 'Ihagee Kamerawerk Steenbergen & Co'. In this new company his mother was not a partner: she lent him her capital at interest.

Because of his lack of technical knowledge Steenbergen engaged six 'Tischler' (woodworkers) as partners in the company: Otto Diebel, Hugo Frauenstein, Emil Kirsch, Emil English, Hermann Schubert and Conrad Koch. Two of them, Emil English and Otto Diebel, he knew from his

apprentice time at Ernemann's. The partnership agreement dates from the 16th of November 1918, just five days after the end of hostilities.



Steenbergen and his partners in the late twenties: standing left to right Hugo Frauenstein, Johan Steenbergen, Conrad Koch, seated Herman Schubert, Otto Diebel and Emil English

The agreement was attractive for both parties. The woodworkers had been unable to exploit their technical skills commercially; for this purpose they needed a man like Steenbergen. On the other hand, by taking them into partnership, Steenbergen tied a group of skilled men to his business and gave Ihagee a technical basis. At the start the woodworkers were normal labourers, in accordance with the partnership agreement, and received standard wages, except for English who was appointed production manager. Steenbergen remained general manager and was, in the early years, the only one with power of attorney.



Steenbergen always rode on his bicycle to the factory

Their mutual relations were excellent; in 1944 English wrote about the typical Steenbergen attitude toward his partners (free translation): 'I must emphasize that our cooperation was always founded on mutual trust. Although Mr. Steenbergen owned 61% (of the company) and we, the five wood-

workers, only 39%, Mr. Steenbergen appreciated the work we did for the company more and, in the long time of our cooperation, he never claimed special rights based on his majority or played off paragraphs of the agreement against us'.

During the Interbellum the company expanded from 20 men to a large business with hundreds of employees. Because many annual reports were lost during the Second World War, it is difficult to form a picture of the way the company developed. The following table shows production figures.

Annual production of Ihagee cameras					
920	3.500	1927	43.000	1934	20.000
921	5.000	1928	47.000	1935	25.000
922	7.000	1929	48.000	1936	35.000
923	10.000	1930	49.000	1937	35.000
924	15.000	1931	48.000	1938	35.000
925	24.000	1932	30.000	1939	35.000
926	35.000	1933	25.000	1940	8.000

e serial numbers of these years start with number 15.500
l end with number 598.000

source : M.Charlier, *Ihagee Historiker Gesellschaft*

The numbers of cameras produced by Ihagee show a picture that seems to contradict the market trends in the Interbellum years. For example, the hyperinflation in Germany in the early 1920s does not show in the production figures; this was because Ihagee sold many products abroad. Steenbergen took a large part in the export. In the spring of 1919 the factory had already produced enough samples, so Steenbergen left for abroad and brought back orders for months of work. Things went that way for years.



1937: obligatory listening to a radio address by Hitler

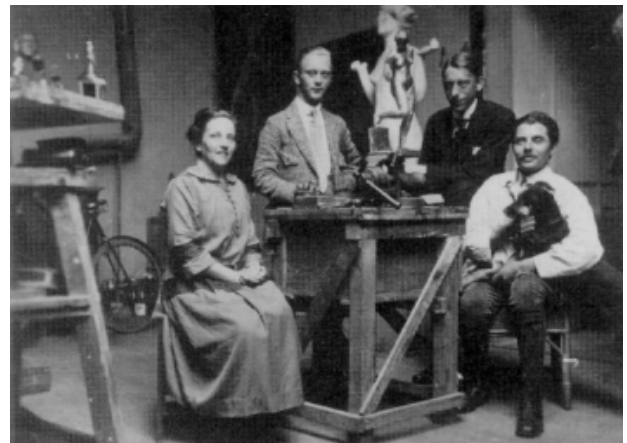
Surprisingly after 1926, while the German economy was at last recovering, growth at Ihagee diminished.

The 'crisis' of 1929 had its effects, but it was not until 1931 that production did slow down. The economic recovery after the takeover by the Nazis in 1933 started relatively late and it was not until 1935 that production grew again.

Shortly after the Nazis came to power, they started the 'Gleichschaltung' (unification under government supervision) of trade, industry, press, associations, etc. Neither Steenbergen nor Ihagee could escape this process.

Later, during World War II, Steenbergen wrote a report for the Dutch government on the conditions in Nazi-Germany. He said (free translation):

The so-called 'Führerprinzip' (leader principle), according to which not a majority, but the leader takes the decisions, resulted in Nazi influence everywhere. I remember how, in the association of industrialists of which my enterprise was a member, I made a counterproposal against a measure in the commercial domain, announced by the board. At my request my proposal was put to a vote and accepted by a large majority. However, this result was lost when the chairman stated that majority decisions had no value. From this I drew the, for me, only possible conclusion by resigning our membership. However, shortly after, this kind of action became impossible. Trade and industry were unified in large groups with obligatory membership, from which nobody could withdraw'.



Johan and his cousin Henri van Wermeskerken visiting the Dutch sculptor Van Ophemert and his wife; Dresden 1921

From 1936 the effects of this controlled economy are clearly visible: annually 35.000 cameras had to be produced: no more, no less!

The development of the Ihagee company was different from the trends in the German economy in

general. This difference had two causes. First, Ihagee was strongly focused on export: the balance sheets for the years 1934 - 1940 show that Ihagee in 1935 sold 48% of its production abroad; this percentage increased to 73 in 1939. The influence of the world economy is clearly visible in the figures. While after 1933 Germany recovered relatively fast, Ihagee in 1934 still struggled with a declining turnover, caused by the general world depression.

Another cause of the difference was the fact that during the crisis years, Ihagee had continued production and had thus built up a relatively large stock: for Ihagee therefore growing sales did not mean an immediate need for increased production. First, the available stock had to be sold.

Moreover, a camera did not fit into the consumption pattern of consumers in a recovering economy. Only after 1936 did domestic sales again account for a substantial part of total turnover.



The new factory at Schandauerstraße

The building occupied in 1919 had quickly become too small. At first the acquisition of an office building was considered, but in 1923 an attractive sizable building site was found in the Dresden 'photo district' of Dresden Striesen, in the vicinity of competitors as Ernemann and ICA. Construction of a factory at the corner of Schandauerstrasse and Bergmannstrasse was started immediately. Several wings were later added to accommodate the growing numbers of employees, machines, storage and drying rooms. At the end of the 1930s about 500 people were employed in the company.

THE EXAKTA

Around the end of the first quarter of the century, the woodworker was still an important person in the camera industry. Although metal camera bodies had

emerged earlier, the bulk of the cameras were still made of wood. The catalogues of the time were full of different models and their variations.



Kine-Exakta, the world's first 35mm SLR

Most Ihagee products were not much different from the current models of the time. However, a few of them had a specialized construction principle, especially the single-lens, mirror-reflex cameras which became famous at home and abroad. A big change occurred when metal working machines were generally introduced.

Steenbergen was able to anticipate market trends very well, and this found expression in the Ihagee products. In the 1930s engineer Karl Nüchterlein developed into a very talented designer. As chief of construction, leading the design team, he was responsible for the design of the sensational Kine-

Exakta, shown by Ihagee at the 1936 Leipzig Fair.



Several patents were registered in the name of Ihagee.

Karl Nüchterlein, designer of the Exakta The Kine-Exakta had a characteristic, trapezium-shaped, light metal body, embodying several outstanding features. Its combination of the small-sized, 24x36 mm. film in a single-lens reflex camera was at first received with suspicion; it was believed to be a technical impossibility. Reality, however, showed otherwise and the camera quickly proved a great success.

Another important concept behind Exakta was that, from the start, it was a 'system camera'. Due to the bayonet-type lens mount, the camera could be fitted with a choice of standard, wide-angle and telephoto lenses and with extension tubes for macro photography. Moreover, various accessories were available, such as microscope adapters, filters, tripods, ever-ready cases and flash equipment.

The Kine-Exakta, as the first miniature ('35 mm.') single-lens reflex, was a milestone in photography technology. All post-war single-lens cameras were developed from this design.

MARRIAGE AND HONORARY CONSUL

The first impression one got of Steenbergen was of a good-natured, charming and considerate man. He had enormous energy and accuracy, but he was always cautious. He had a good insight into human nature and was a good mixer. The impression of calmness was not quite in accordance with his real character; sometimes he could be quite sharp with his staff.



Johan Steenbergen with his wife Elisabeth Nussbaum

Most of his time he spent on Ihagee, but making good use of his leisure time was also important to him. He did not need much sleep and always went to work on time, even if the night before had been a late one. He maintained a strong bond with his mother and his other relatives in the Netherlands.

He lived in a rented apartment and did not care much about fitting up his rooms. His life changed, however, in 1930 when he met Elisabeth Louisa Nussbaum. They were married in 1931. The couple moved into a spacious house on Justinenstrasse, tastefully furnished by Mrs. Steenbergen.



Saint Nicolas party in "New Holland" Dresden 1931

In 1928 Johan Steenbergen had been appointed Honorary Consul of the Netherlands in Dresden. The consular office was set up in the offices of the Ihagee factory; the front of the building was henceforward decorated with the handsome coat of arms of the consulate. Steenbergen was now to be addressed as 'Herr Konsul'. On occasion, he used this title to capitalize on the strong sense of hierarchy in the German character.

After the takeover of the government by the Nazis, Steenbergen travelled less and less alone as his wife was of Jewish origin and anti-Jewish sentiment was growing in Germany. This naturally increased Johan's distaste for the Nazis. Fortunately, his wife had American nationality, which protected her to some degree against persecution.

WAR YEARS

On May 10th 1940 German troops invaded the neutral Netherlands. As consul of an enemy nation Steenbergen was arrested on May 11th. During his captivity he was visited by a 'Rüstungskommissar' (commissioner for arms procurement) and two senior officers, who wished to ensure his cooperation in making his factory available for war

production. Steenbergen refused; he and his wife were then interned.

After a short imprisonment they were allowed to return to Dresden, but forbidden to leave the city and Steenbergen lost the full control of his assets. He was not permitted to enter the production rooms of his factory which were now under the direction of the Air Ministry. In August 1941 the properties of both Steenbergen and his wife were completely confiscated. Curiously enough, this did not mean that Johan was not allowed into his office, he was able to continue to work there.



Dresden in ruins. Februari 1945

Already in 1938 Steenbergen had foreseen that he might sometime lose control of his capital and be made to leave Germany. Therefore he gave full power of attorney to act for him and his wife during their absence to his accountant and friend Dr. Erich Glier. In order to safeguard future income the pension regulations of the company were modified; the entitlement to a pension was no longer tied to the ownership of a share in the company.

Also in August 1941, the managers and directors of the company were dismissed, and a member of the Nazi party was appointed as managing-director. Steenbergen was afraid that through mismanagement by this man he might lose his entire property. In order to reduce that risk and to protect his enterprise, the name and structure of the company were changed. On October 8th 1941 Ihagee Kamerawerk was split up: land, buildings and machines, as being least subject to risk, remained the property of the original company but under the name of Steenbergen & Co. The underlying thought was that, in case of mismanagement, the liquid capital could be lost, but the buildings etc. would not; after his return Steenbergen would then be able to start again with these.

Moreover, Steenbergen & Co functioned also as holding company for a part of the shares in a new firm entitled Ihagee Kamerawerk A.G., the remaining shares being left in the hands of the original partners. Steenbergen's share in both companies remained at 61%.

Meanwhile Steenbergen attempted to leave Germany by arranging an exchange with German diplomatic personnel abroad, even though he knew that he would not be allowed to export his capital. Eventually in 1942 Elisabeth, as an American citizen, managed to obtain an exit permit and Johan was allowed to accompany her. On May 15th of that year, with the help of Sweden and Switzerland, Johan and Elisabeth left Dresden - never to return.

After a short farewell visit to relatives in the Netherlands, the couple travelled via Lisbon to the USA. They first stayed in New York and then went on to San Francisco, where Elisabeth had relatives and some property.

Previously, in Dresden, Steenbergen had agreed with his partners to try to promote the interests of Ihagee in the USA. He made contact with various photographic companies in order to have the Exakta produced under licence. This failed, mainly because the Allies had taken trade rights and patents into cus-



today.

The factory at Schadauerstraße after the raid

Late in 1943 Steenbergen started work in the Netherlands' consulate in San Francisco; in March 1944 he was promoted to consul. In view of his experience as director/proprietor of a major company in Germany, the Netherlands Government asked him to go to Germany after the war as a member of the staff of the Allied occupation authorities

COLONEL STEENBERGEN

In 1946 Steenbergen was commissioned straight into the rank of Colonel; he used to joke about his lack of previous military experience. He was attached to the Netherlands Military Mission in occupied Germany until 1949 and stationed successively in Berlin, München and Baden-Baden, representing the Dutch Government with the authorities of the Occupation Forces in the various cities. Wherever he was, he was much appreciated for his excellent social qualities due to his charming personality but also to the amusing stories he used to tell.



When Colonel Steenbergen moved to Germany, he had thought to return to Dresden immediately. He had learned that his factory had been destroyed in the bombing raid but he hoped to start reconstruction under his own direction. Shortly after the bombing, members

of his old work force had succeeded in salvaging some machines and materials from the ruins and they had set up production again in a rented building.

He had expected that, with the support of the Netherlands Military Mission's headquarters, he could obtain an entry permit for the Russian Zone, including Dresden. However, despite numerous formal attempts by the Western Allies, the Soviet authorities refused. Moreover communications with the Russian Zone were very difficult: postal traffic was badly obstructed and telephone connections were either bad or forbidden. Nevertheless, he eventually managed to contact his former partners after which he was allowed to send them food parcels regularly.

Meanwhile the company was active and operated independently under the Russian occupation but in 1951 the East-German DDR- government took the company into 'protective custody'. Production continued but operations were controlled by a trustee 'on behalf of Steenbergen'. This construction was adopted because Steenbergen had succeeded, with the help of the Military Mission, to prevent his company from being expropriated. The DDR authorities did not dare nationalize a company of

which the majority of shares were in foreign hands. Such an action might have had a negative influence in the war damages negotiations between the Netherlands and the DDR.

Besides the problems concerning Ihagee, Johan suffered grievous losses: his brother Hermann died in 1945, his wife Elisabeth in 1948, his mother in 1949. It took him years to overcome these losses, but he could never reconcile himself with the loss of his factory.



A SECOND IHAGEE

For some years after the war Steenbergen attempted to regain control of Ihagee. When these efforts proved futile, he next tried to obtain the trade rights of Ihagee for use in the West. In the USA he started several lawsuits regarding the trademarks and patents of Ihagee, but in vain.



Then the idea emerged to move the seat of the company to Western Germany. The procedure took some time but eventually, on November 30th 1959, the company was formally registered in Frankfurt/Main.

The grounds at Schandauerstraße after the war

For some time it appeared that both parties - known as Ihagee West and Ihagee Dresden - could operate independently. But from 1960 onwards, there were continuous legal fights about patents and trademarks, at severe cost of money and energy to Ihagee West, which eventually led to its liquidation.



The Exakta Real, produced by Ihagee West in Berlin

In 1966, shortly before his death, Steenbergen was able to witness the production of a camera by Ihagee West; unfortunately, the product proved too expensive and, moreover, unreliable.

Ihagee in East Germany continued to produce under DDR supervision but as an independent company until 1972. Then it was forced to merge into the Volkseigene Betrieb (people's property enterprise) Pentagon Dresden. Cameras with the name Exakta produced after 1973 are mostly Japanese products, and they have no relation whatsoever to the original Exakta.

THE DIPLOMAT

In 1949 Steenbergen was 63 years old. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs realized that it had the moral obligation to find him an assignment, for due to the loss of his company, he had no private income. In 1950 he was demobilized and for a short time was acting consul in Bad Ems. On April 1st he was appointed consul in Hanover.

In this function he again tended to make use of his strongest point, establishing human contacts. He was held in great esteem in Hanover and could pride himself on his good relations with the government of Niedersachsen (Lower Saxonia), the British occupation forces and other Allied authorities.

He was very disappointed when in 1954 the Hanover consulate was closed. He was transferred to Emden, a modest post indeed, but one that kept him fully occupied nevertheless.

There was a longstanding disagreement between the Netherlands and Germany regarding the exact position of the boundary in the waters of Ems and Dollard. This caused a considerable amount of work and came on top of the normal consular activities. The main points of conflict arose regularly from fishing activities in these waters. However, due to Steenbergen's cordial contacts with the authorities, he generally managed to get the parties to the conference table hosting them in his own home. In this way he created an atmosphere in which friendly solutions could be found.



Consul Steenbergen in 1956

Steenbergen managed to improve the relations between the two countries, which had, of course, suffered during the war. A good description of the way in which he carried out his duties was published by the Ostfriesenzeitung (East Friesland daily) of February 25, 1961 (free translation):

The strong feelings of gratitude towards the Smiling Diplomat, as he is known both in Ost Friesland and further away, can be deduced from the fact that he could manage to bring 'official protocol' into his private home, thereby placing himself in the centre of social activities.

When in 1960 the Netherlands and Germany reached an agreement on the Ems and Dollart, the presence of a professional consul in Emden was no longer required. Steenbergen, therefore, retired on March

1st, 1961 - at the age of 74! He left Emden and settled in Osnabrück where he died on March 7th, 1967.

Already in 1939, before the war, Queen Wilhelmina had rewarded his consular activities in Dresden with the rank of Companion of the Order of Oranje-Nassau; in 1956 he was promoted to Officer of the same Order. The appreciation from the German side was expressed in 1961 by the bestowal of the Bundesverdienstkreuz 1.Klasse (Federal Cross of Merit, 1st Class).

POSTSCRIPTUM

Steenbergen's entire life was determined by the course of the history of Germany. Nevertheless he always considered himself primarily a Dutchman. The Ihagee company was his life's work and great love, but the experience he gained in his years in Ihagee allowed him to start a second successful career as a consul. The fact that he had owned a major company in Germany, and lost it, made him, in the view of many West Germans, an equal and understanding interlocutor.

The value of Steenbergen's life lies in the human sphere: at first in his excellent relations with his workers, later, after World War II, in his contribution to restoring the relations between the peoples of the Netherlands and Germany. His main advantage lay in the fact that, despite his bitter sense of loss, he maintained his sympathy with the individual German. He could be an example for many, his sense of perspective made him always opposed to extremes and considerate in his opinion of others.

The Rhein-Ems Zeitung (Rhine-Ems newspaper) of March 8th 1967 published his obituary

(free translation):

This man, always modest in his behaviour, managed to put his entire energy, his extensive professional knowledge and his rich experience into the balance when there was a need to improve the relations between his home country and the Federal Republic, especially Ost-Friesland, and to stimulate friendship between the people on both sides of the Dollart. This entitles him to gratitude and appreciation.

Before his death Steenbergen set up a foundation to which he left much of a large part of his capital.

Nowadays this foundation is active in promoting care for the environment, the safeguarding of Dutch cultural inheritance and improving consideration for the third world. This also forms a part of Johan's legacy. This Hermann Diedrich Steenbergen Stichting, since 1965 Steenbergen Stichting was a tribute to his elder brother Hermann Diedrich Steenbergen.

STEENBERGEN STICHTING

Established in 1961 by Johan Steenbergen in memory of his elder brother

Hermann Diedrich Steenbergen (1883-1945)

Hermann Steenbergen graduated in chemical engineering at the Technical University of Delft. He started his career in the governmental Food Inspection Department and later became director in the town of Eindhoven for the whole region. His main interest went out to the quality and composition of foodstuffs and to the proper and sanitary preparation of food.

He was an upright man who combined perseverance with a charitable disposition which led him to fulfil several positions as a volunteer for both the Protestant church and the local branch of a liberal political party.

During World War II he was appointed to lead the Food Inspection Department in Nijmegen, which brought him into trouble with the German occupying authorities when he tried to prevent his employees from being sent to Germany as forced labour. He had to leave Nijmegen overnight and went underground in Amsterdam where he died, undernourished, at the age of 61 during the last winter of the war.

Johan Steenbergen (1886-1967)

Johan went to Dresden in 1908 to become an apprentice in the one of the numerous camera-producing firms that were concentrated there before World War I. He himself started his own company: Ihagee Kamerawerk, which designed and produced the well-known Exakta camera: the first miniature (35mm) single-lens reflex camera in the world.

In 1928 he was appointed Honorary Consul for the Kingdom of the Netherlands; as such he intervened with the authorities on behalf of victims of the Nazi's. In 1942 he could leave Germany because his wife got an exit permit, being an American citizen.

After this Steenbergen worked at the Dutch consulate in San Francisco. His company and private possessions were confiscated first by the nazi-, then the Soviet- and finally by the DDR-government. Steenbergen was never allowed to return to Dresden after the war and he never saw his factory or employees or colleagues again.

In the West he became consul for the Netherlands again, successively in Hanover and Emden. He furthered German-Dutch relations through his generous personality which was such that he never extended his bitterness over the losses due to the war to individual German citizens. He was greatly helped in his diplomatic career by his knowledge of pre-war Germany.

As decorations he received the Dutch Order of Oranje-Nassau in the rank of Officer and from the West-German government the Bundesverdienstkreuz 1st class.

Steenbergen Stichting,
The Hague, The Netherlands, 2000.

The first edition is “sold” out. A second edition is in the making (2009.07) and will be made available free as soon as possible.

There is also a mini-biography in Dutch.

This Mini-biography is an abstract from the full Steenbergen biography “Johan Steenbergen, De lachende diplomaat” by Drs. E.H. Halbertsma. The full biography is available from the Steenbergen Foundation, but only in the Dutch language.