

80 years ago: War experiences of a medical student in psychiatric institution 'Voorburg' in Vught, The Netherlands

(by: drs. Lucas van der Hoeven 2024-08-06)

Fran van der Hoeven started studying Medicine in September 1936 at the university of Leiden, the Netherlands. He commuted from The Hague as a 'railway student': scholarships were not available, his parents had to pay for his study costs, so moving out was too costly. The German occupation changed his life. On November 26, 1940, the University of Leiden closed¹ and he had to continue his studies in Amsterdam. From November 1943, he worked as a 'co-assistant'² (assistant physician) in the women's ward of the psychiatric institution 'Voorburg' in Vught.³ The prevailing psychiatric model was mainly 'sticking to the guns' and even that proved unfeasible. Van der Hoeven describes his working place⁴: *"We have a day room for calm and one for restless women, a ward for epileptics, a ward for bedside nursing, a bathroom and a sick ward. And there is a corridor with a row of rooms used for completely unmanageable, aggressive patients, who are dangerous. This week one of them completely destroyed the bed and the door, and smashed everything on hand. She is an extremely dangerous psychopathic woman, who had to be restrained by four people. Today she was fortunately calmer, and had fixed (???) the straw mattress again. That corridor is the most terrible thing I saw here; it is more animal than human, more terrible than anything else"*. In addition to these daily horrors, in 1943 'Voorburg' had to deal with a doubling of the number of patients, transferred from seaside psychiatric institutions that had to close down because of the construction of the Atlantic Wall.⁵ Until the liberation, the food and fuel supply became increasingly precarious. There was also a *"shortage of medicines, which means that the weak will die sooner"*. In September 1944 he noted: *"At the moment, several hundred bombers can be clearly seen above our terrain; the sky full of streaks is a magnificent sight. The roar of the engines is thundering, the house is shaking"*. With the arrival of the Allies, the dangers of war had not passed: in February 1945, an airplane bomb fell on a corridor. He wrote: *"If it had fallen ½ minute later I would have been dead, because I wanted to go through the corridor to a meeting. I was stiff with fright. It was 20 meters away from me and I only had a small head wound. Miraculously, there was only one dead and about 100 wounded... Sensitized by this fear, I could no longer stand the VIs that sometimes fell in the neighbourhood with about 20 of them at night"*.

His fiancée lived in still occupied Rotterdam, which made it impossible to write or telephone for 7 months. It was not until May 1945 that he wrote her: *"We were liberated on October 25th. I received your letter of October 18th a week later. That was the last one. The war was very serious here. We were under heavy shell fire for three nights; two Sisters were killed by twelve shell impacts and ten people were wounded. Those were anxious days, which were spent in the cellars. When the English finally arrived, there was another full day of fighting around the house before the Germans withdrew. We were liberated and I felt myself returning to life. The food became very bad in the following weeks. No electricity, no heating. It was much worse than before the liberation. But gradually it started to get better. Life resumed its course, until the VIs arrived, which came chugging along for months. It was a terrible time"*. In July 1945 Van der Hoeven, still an assistant physician, was responsible for 500 female patients, a number that would normally require 4 fulltime doctors. *"I take care of Servaas and St Anna on my own"*. He was afraid people might find out that he had not yet graduated as a doctor! He may also have performed unauthorized acts such as administering a Rorschach test; applying shock therapy; prescribing pervitin and sleeping

pills; performing 4 test excisions on a deaf-mute patient. It was not until September 1945 that normality returned: Van der Hoeven could take his final exams and become a qualified doctor. *drs. Lucas van der Hoeven, psychologist and science-journalist.*

¹ On 26 November 1940, professor Rudolph Cleveringa, dean of the law faculty, gave a fiery speech in the Academy Building to protest against the dismissal of Jewish employees, including lawyer Eduard Meijers, the later founder of the new Civil Code. Medical professor Ton Barge devoted his lecture on the same day to the untenability of the theory of racial doctrine. The students also went on strike. The university was subsequently closed by the occupying forces. https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universiteit_Leiden

² 'Blue Books' Voorburg Vught: the annual reports of Voorburg mention the medical staff; between 1943 and 1945 F.M. van der Hoeven is resident assistant physician. From 7 September 1945 he is a 'physician' after passing his medical exam.

³ Kappelhof, A.C.M.; Reinier van Arkel 1442 -1992, the history of the oldest psychiatric hospital in the Netherlands"; 's Hertogenbosch, 1992 ISBN 90-800911-1-1 (no details about WWII).

⁴ City Archives; 's-Hertogenbosch; NL-HtSA Archive number 1092; Correspondence van der Hoeven – Sadée, 1938-1948, inventory number 1092. The original letters are privately owned.

⁵ Ruijter, de, E.; Brinkmann, J.; "Report on the psychiatric institution St-Willibroodus-Stichting, for male nervous and mental patients in Heiloo over the year 1940; 1941 - 1945; GGZ Noord-Holland-Noord; p. 73 - 258.

- <https://open.spotify.com/show/1Yy6FUL8KdrxjmUGqGAYE> : 2024; podcast about psychiatry in WWII.

- 'Reinier van Arkel and Voorburg during the Second World War, stories of eyewitnesses"; exhibition in Reinier van Arkel, September 11, 2021; 91 p.

- Gietema, M.; Stegge, aan de, C.; "Forgotten victims, psychiatric institution de Willem Arntsz Hoeve in the Second World War"; Boom; 2017; ISBN 9789089539465; 269 p.

- Buchheim, E.; Futselaar, R.; "Expelled from care, the Dutch Lunacy Ordinance during the Second World War"; Boom; 2023; ISBN 9789024457342; letter F. van der Hoeven p. 141-142.

- Original War Diary of an (anonymous) nurse from Voorburg in Vught about the period 4 September 1944 – 30 October 1944. Vughts Museum under no. D00168.