

Jacob Now! - *The Tender Activist*

Essay by Mark Schalken

'Why would you dedicate yourself to a society that doesn't accept you?' With that question in mind, I hitchhiked from Breda to Amsterdam in the fall of 1990. For my thesis at the Breda Art Academy, I interviewed Benno Premsela, the most influential and outspoken gay designer of those years. 'As a Jewish child I was almost destroyed by the war and I wouldn't allow myself to be destroyed again because of my homosexuality. ... People who don't adapt, that is hopeful, society can move forward with that.' I also interviewed monumental artist Karin Daan, who designed the Homomonument a few years earlier: 'My eye immediately noticed the bend in the Prinsengracht. Taxis and cyclists speed past it... the monument is now our place and at the same time society goes right through it. That's how I see integration.'

High ideals and daily practice was the title of my thesis. In Amsterdam as an aspiring designer and quite insecure gay boy I was looking for role models. My bond with Jacob Israël de Haan (1881-1924) began as soon as I read his line of poetry in the pink-colored stone of the Homomonument: *Such an infinite desire for friendship*. I was 23, the age at which he published his controversial first gay novel.

Other than the other others

In the years around 1900, Jacob broke away from his religious Jewish upbringing. He found his place in the socialist movement, wrote about strikes for the socialist newspaper *Het Volk* and filled the children's section. His literature was shaped by the Tachtigers, such as Kloos and Verwey, who cautiously introduced homoeroticism into their work. In 1904 with *Pijpelijntjes* he laid all

his cards on the table: as a gay man, artist and socialist. The undisguisedly sexual serial was set in Amsterdam's new working-class district De Pijp, where students Sam and Joop live together. Although their relationship seems doomed, homosexual desires are the outspoken driving force of the book.

Much was later psychoanalyzed about that unbalanced, partly sadomasochistic relationship between Sam and Joop. Heterosexual commentators such as WF Hermans turned out to be blind to the enormous social pressure that much young gay love succumbs to. Even now, more than a century later, almost all Netflix series with a queer slant revolve around the same storyline: one young character is open and longing for sex and friendship, but the other hesitates and gives up – worried about his family and future. *Pijpelijntjes*: a serial about the sexual discoveries of two boys in a turbulent city setting. High time for a Netflix film adaptation.

In my interpretation, De Haan yearned to belong to a community all his life. However, when push came to shove, he never bowed to group pressure. Perhaps that characterizes gays (and other minorities), because do they ever really belong?

Jacob wishes to be completely an artist, completely a socialist, and completely a homosexual. But after the publication of *Pijpelijntjes*, writers he looked up to, like Van Eeden, distanced themselves from his book. De Haan was dismissed from the Socialist newspaper *Het Volk*. He started a fierce polemic with the editor-in-chief Tak (who may have been gay himself), but lost his community and lost his job as a teacher as well. Banished.

In these years, several gay or bisexual writers and doctors tried to create understanding for 'the homosexual question' under the impersonal cover of their profession. But Jacob is different from the others. He has spoken too freely. Perhaps that is why he did not become involved in the political struggle for

emancipation. In 1911, conservative politicians introduced a new law: article 248bis (only abolished in 1970). The age of consent for gay sex was raised from 16 to 21, with a penalty of four years in prison.

Promised land?

De Haan set out in life. He expanded his writing skills, obtained his law degree and became a journalist and poet. He gets involved in international issues such as the appalling prison conditions in Tsarist Russia. He traveled there three times and published a report, interspersed with poems for the young revolutionary Georges Dmitrenko. The erotic undertone may have provoked disapproval from many readers, but for Jacob the full truth – in literature and love – always came first.

His English contemporary EM Forster, born in an upper-class environment, wrote a gay novel a few years before De Haan's. But Forster did not dare to publish it: *Maurice* did not appear until 1971, only after his death. Other novels, such as *Howards End* in which he dissects class society, made Forster famous. But the taboo of male love turned into a writer's block. He stopped being a novelist and became authoritative as an essayist and BBC radio commentator, he became a Lord. During his long life, Forster traveled to India and Egypt. In Cairo he had a relationship with an Egyptian man that lasted for many years. In the late 1960s – Forster was well into his eighties – Andy Warhol invited him to his *Factory*. Imagine, Jacob could have been there, in New York at the time of the *Stonewall riots* ...

A frequently quoted statement by Forster reads: 'If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.'

Back to 1919, the year in which De Haan moves to Palestine. In the previous years he rediscovered the rituals and warmth of the religion of his youth. In the meantime, he got married to Johanna van Maarseveen, the first female Amsterdam municipal doctor. She cannot stop him, Jacob feels like a Jewish poet, drawn to the eternal city of Jerusalem. Moreover, he can work for the newspaper *Handelsblad*.

Driven by pogroms in Eastern Europe, many Jews moved to Palestine in those years, dreaming of their own Jewish state. The Dutchman De Haan also became such a hopeful, passionate Zionist. But even upon arrival he noted: 'The Jews may be a people without a country, but Palestine is not a country without a people.' He is attracted to the Orthodox Jews, who have lived there for centuries, and becomes friends with Arabs. His newspaper articles soon contained sharp criticism of the one-sided Zionist pursuit of power.

Lonely fire

In addition to his newspaper pieces, Jacob writes hundreds of quatrains about his longing for God and beautiful boys. On a hot day on the beach of Jaffa, he sees a Bedouin undress and ride naked into the sea on his horse to cool off. He falls for the young Arabs: 'They are wild, hospitable and loyal. And Adil can be so fierce and nice.' Desire for the exotic – Orientalism – guides his way of seeing. At the same time, his lust is also a driver of his imagination and empathy and guides his moral compass. Ever curious, Jacob always ignores the us-versus-them thinking. His newspaper serials testify to a big heart, to a compassion that, as many quatrains show, he found it difficult to muster towards himself.

The *fierce and nice* Adil is the young horse trader Adil Effendi Aoueddah (1900-1952). They develop a close bond. How

sexual did Jacob's friendships become? Some surviving and unpublished quatrains are certainly suggestive:

*Where no one has kissed you I will kiss,
crueler and more tender than on your mouth.
You will weep, but not one flood can quench
The fire that God sent us.*

In 1922 Adil left for Europe. Jacob becomes exhausted and depressed. He has built up authority with his contacts and his sharp pen, but is increasingly creating bad blood within the Zionist movement. In May 1923, Jacob received a death threat. He writes a chillingly laconic story about the week before the foretold shot. Nothing happens that day. A year later it did happen.

His murder on June 30, 1924 led to much ado and speculation. There is only real sadness in a small circle. His sister is broken. She, the philosopher and writer Carry van Bruggen, had always followed his work. They shared their childhood in the house by the ditch in Zaandam and both struggled against social contempt: Jacob as a Jew and a gay man, Carry as a Jew and a woman.

It was called the first political murder in Palestine. But the question still remains why Zionist leaders chose this extreme means to eliminate a Jewish anti-Zionist. Did machismo and militarism play a role? De Haan: a disgusting pervert who deserved to be eliminated?

'Tell people that homosexuals are not necessarily weaklings', wrote artist and resistance hero Willem Arondéus in his farewell letter. Arondéus (1894-1943), like De Haan, had a restless, searching life. Then war breaks out. He joins the resistance and helps to organize the attack on the Amsterdam civil registry. He was

caught and shot by the German occupiers on July 1, 1943. What a tragedy there is behind his last words! They suggest how lonely Arondéus was and how isolated homosexuals were. Had De Haan's gay courage already been forgotten?

Brave & sweet

When initiators Mattias Duyves and Jan Willem Tellegen suggested making a publication to commemorate De Haan, Mattias showed me a unique wine glass from the 18th century, now on display in the Rijksmuseum. The glass was purchased by his husband Gert Hekma (1951-2022), assistant professor of gay studies at the University of Amsterdam. Engraved in it are the words

'The sweet friendship' with two roosters lying on top of each other. It comes from the time of the persecution (exile, execution) of sodomites and was created to covertly celebrate homosexual friendship. How special that this fragile glass is still intact! Gay history is one of fragmentation. It is up to us to pick up the pieces and make them sparkle again.

My husband Ron Mesland is a composer and singer. In 2018 he decided to set the quatrains to music. Ron: 'At school I read De Haan for my reading list. As a gay boy from the Dutch bible belt, I saw a kindred spirit. The quatrains are about politics, faith, the stag paws of shepherd boys and donkeys, and just as easily about homesickness for the Dutch landscape and his Jewish youth. Almost every poem contains lines that lift it above its time. Like, say, Cole Porter or The Beatles, who also alternate clichés with well-timed great finds.'

Thanks to Ron's music and Jan Fontijn's biography, I got to know the poet of infinite friendship better. I was touched by Jacob's sensual style and way of life. There is a certain heaviness surrounding De Haan, but when I wanted to depict his quatrains, I

made colorful collages, based on the simplicity and tactility of paper.

'Why would you dedicate yourself to a society that doesn't accept you?' My 1990 thesis question with which I began this essay was, of course, naive. After all, society does concern itself with me. Pain from my high school days predominated. But the lonely realization that you are not seen can also make you sensitive to others who are not seen. The tragedy of the animals in the Dutch meat industry (one hundred million slaughtered annually) motivated me three years ago to publish the graphic novel *The Meat Free City*. I connect my creativity with activism, inspired by past queer artists, from James Baldwin to Benno Premesela, and of course Jacob.

Long ago, the week I turned 18, I had my coming out. Did I talk enough with my now deceased father in the many years since? After his father's death, De Haan wrote: *'My father's eyes were brown and tender'*. And: *'As long as he lived I dare not ask him / Whether he knew what trembles in my veins.'*

Jacob Israël de Haan: my tender activist.

Jacob now

In conclusion. De Haan regretted not having any children. But I see his descendants everywhere. Creative queers, often bicultural like him, who appropriate history and speak out about our future. For example, writer Raoul de Jong, who grew up with his Dutch mother, met his Surinamese father for the first time at the age of 28. His father discouraged him from searching further, and perhaps that is precisely why Raoul turns to the history of his fatherland and writes *Jaguarman*. His essay *Boto Banja* is his ode to 'a secret society of mischievous writers who made their voices heard – whether the world was ready for them or not'.

While Raoul embraces the Winti faith in his quest, writer and political scientist Mounir Samuel is guided by the Old Testament in *Jonah without the whale*. To show the impact of climate change, he takes us to the prehistoric whale skeletons that lie beneath the Egyptian Sahara sands – once there was an ocean here. ‘No Pride on a dead planet,’ preaches Samuel, who is a trans man, ‘It’s we who must fight for a livable earth.’

To be honest, I often have doubts about Mounir’s ‘we’. Is there a rainbow community in the Netherlands? Do we take care of each other, build on each other? But then I think of De Haan, who as an artist connected his sexuality with a great sense of justice, beauty and urgency. In his day, Jacob was a conflicted connector. Even now, as mischievous – *queer* – artists, we can play a public role to heal both the world and ourselves.

Jacob lives.

‘The Tender Activist; Jacob Israël de Haan 1881-1924’

ISBN 9789083420400

version May 27, 2024, www.markschalken.nl