

The Netherlands' first radical gay activist

Essay Mattias Duyves

Such an immeasurable longing for friendship...

Anyone who visits the Homomonument in Amsterdam will read these beautiful words from 1913 by Jacob Israël de Haan. In the early 1900s, when 'such an immeasurable desire' still aroused such an immeasurable revulsion, he was the Netherlands' first militant gay activist.

Who was Jacob Israël de Haan? He was born in 1881 into a traditional Jewish family in Drenthe without any money, grew up in Zaandam and Haarlem from 1885 and managed to escape to Amsterdam in 1900 as a young teacher. He soon made it impossible for himself with groundbreaking gay novels, never taking back a word in his entire life, and disappeared from the Netherlands for good in 1919 to Palestine - where he was murdered in Jerusalem in 1924, much too young, only 42 years old. Until his last breath, he did not allow his love of men to be sullied or challenged by others, by anyone. He did not want any interference. He turned his novels, verses and religious beliefs into a sanctuary for his romantic feelings, an air bridge to a coming-out that did not yet exist in the Netherlands, not for a long time, an acceptance that he would never experience. We commemorate the 100th anniversary of his death on June 30, 2024.

In his cramped Jewish boyhood in Zaandam, he stood out because of the way he acted, walked and talked. Ten years later, his dear mother Betje Rubens said to the neighbors: 'Oh

well, in a hundred years' time everything will be very normal!' During his teacher training years in Haarlem, he broke with his father's strict rules - he took the exciting children's stories with him. The Haarlem rabbi De Vries confronted him with the latest ideas about Judaism. Moreover, Joop or Jobb, as De Haan called himself for a while, became friends with the influential psychiatrist and writer Frederik van Eeden, 20 years older, with whom he fell madly in love: 'there is a lot of talk about my 'hopeless' love but I don't care... I always think it's good that what I say is passed on. Otherwise, I'd rather not say it.' All his life he loved that man more than his wife, it was later said.

His short stay in Haarlem had a lasting influence on his personal development. He came into contact with the wealth of ideas of his time, followed the latest trends and devoured everything he could get his hands on in the library and magazines about anarchism, socialism, Zionism, ideas about free love and sexual education, about Dutch, French and English literature, about human nature, cultural progress and decline. De Haan was filled with it and kept track of everything feverishly. 'My reading is everything to me'; he took a lot of care of himself, regularly fell down and then got back up again.

In Amsterdam, in 1902 he fell in love with the older progressive municipal doctor and writer Arnold Aletrino, called Sam to his friends. He remained his closest friend for a few years and gave Joop a thorough sexual re-education, including the latest views from Germany on homosexuality, sadism and masochism – quite normal deviations according to a small vanguard of intellectuals and artists. Jacob de Haan, as he now called himself, let his hair down in his gay novels *Pijpelijntjes*

(1904) and *Pathologies* (1908), more challenging than anyone else before him and for a long time afterwards, touching a sore spot of the cautious Aletrino who makes him laugh: 'My friend says: you have to be careful / otherwise I don't want to be your friend / Ha ha , those careful friends.' ' His P affairs' , he later called them. On the contrary, in *Pijpelijntjes* - named this way because the story takes place in the Amsterdam neighborhood Pijp, at his own home address Sint Willibrordusstraat 29, which still exists - De Haan fantasizes an SM-gay relationship between Sam and Joop that is very credible. Without batting an eyelid it is about being gay together, sharing a bed, cruising on Dam Square, taking a business boy home. Aletrino was furious about the book, ended their friendship and bought the entire edition at one go, get rid of it!

De Haan was not deterred and fought back with his next book. He will call himself Jacob Israël de Haan. Israel means ' he who fights with God . In 1908 he went far beyond his first book with the gay novel *Pathologies*. A sadistic artist drives his smitten masochistic friend inexorably to his death. De Haan's last remaining literary friends rejected him. He lost his job at school, at the newspaper, at literary magazines, was boycotted and was on his own. Loathed by everyone who mattered, run into the ground and silenced', De Haan quits. He 'succumbs', a typical De Haan word, to the outside pressure that affects him from all sides. He will no longer write gay novels, only gay poems, other poetry, serials, travel stories and political columns. Between 1900 and 1910, he was the Netherlands' first militant gay activist with a pen, describing gay relationships in all their scents and colors, possibly the very

first Dutchman to come so far out of the closet. But such a thing did not exist.

After 1910 he took a different approach and his love of foreign men and boys played a major role in his work and his life. His poetry takes over from his prose. It is no longer about cohabiting relationships between men under their own names somewhere in the Netherlands, but about situations with a stranger somewhere along the way, on the street, while traveling or along the beach, as in his sonnet 'To a young fisherman', the sonnet with that well-known line.

You would think that De Haan is talking about his own desire for friendship. But no, he's talking about the intense longing he reads in the boy's eyes. De Haan met him in August 1911 while on holiday in the Breton fishing village of Dahouët. The boy asked him home to have dinner with his father and the children. At the table he called Saint Yves his favorite saint and asked De Haan about his. He answered wittily, in French: ' I adored everyone who was sweet and beautiful. I have often wandered, but today I know for sure... that you are my Saint!' The boy could not have known that Hebrew uses the same word for the blessed and for the catamite.

Jacob Israël de Haan wrote the words 'Such an immeasurable desire for friendship' even though he had already ended his militant period of confrontational novels. After his ' coming out' period, he began his *teshuvah* years in 1909, a return to his orthodox Jewish roots. From now on, De Haan looked for a balance, a comparison between the two in his poems. Time and again he starts talking about forgiveness and absolution when his heart once again succumbed to pain and joy. In 'To a Young Fisherman' and numerous other Quatrains he not only

asks forgiveness but also prays that he will never succumb to such an immoderate desire.

From now on, his militancy extends to situations abroad: the fate of construction workers and garbage collectors in Belgium, of prisoners in England and Russia, of the Arabs and Jews in Palestine. He visits them by boat, train, horse and cart, in Antwerp, London, Riga, Moscow, Petersburg, Jerusalem, all of Palestine. In his poems – you could call them cruising poems – his poet's sense is alert to their inaccessibility and their beauty, but also to their vulnerability and their assault by madness, indeed the stranglehold of people, the environment and the moment.

His pen and person stood up for the rejected, condemned and deprived as if their pain were his own. He made an in-depth study of criminal law terms such as 'accountable', 'liable' and 'non compos mentis'. In 1916 he obtained his doctorate from the City University of Amsterdam.

He applied his insight in his many famous 'Quatrains' (1920-1924), the better ones of which are considered among the best in Dutch poetry. In the hundreds of quatrains from the Palestinian years (1919-1924), filled with self-torture and self-flagellation, he single-handedly gives his immeasurable longings for friendship, his 'heartaches', a full-fledged place – more than just a parking space – within his Jewish religious beliefs. Balm to come to terms with his soul and his senses, their sins and wounds. Together they form his portable Wailing Wall, with their full and free synergy between his sexual and religious needs. In the artistic act of his quatrains, homoeroticism takes his Jewish faith to a higher level, just as his faith takes his eroticism to a higher level. Until his last

breath he did not just put his feelings somewhere, hide them away or deny them, but upheld them and commended them. Poetry offered him peace of mind, reassurance, apology, self-acceptance. Reassurance for his sexual and religious remorse – his poisoning – which arose as a result of his religious beliefs, his time, his own gay unrest; absolution of his 'dark' intimate desires to which he sometimes' succumbed', sometimes not. No excuses, he acquits himself, sometimes before he admits to it, other times afterwards. Jacob Israël de Haan never allowed his homoerotic feelings to be taken away. Twenty years after his militant coming-out in prose in the Netherlands, Jacob Israël de Haan managed to find his own Jewish metamorphosis in poetry, his second very different coming-out, as a sexual asylum seeker in the orthodox Jewish sexual labyrinth in Palestine.

After his sensational murder in 1924, the first gay activist in Dutch literature was remembered in Jewish circles as the first militant victim of violent Zionism far away in Palestine - much less as a poet, more as a traitor or precisely as a martyr of the Zionist project, and so it is always in pain and that is why it might be better not to. In the Netherlands we remember his immense desire for friendship. He tormented himself a bit, gave in to it, always held on to it and passed it on indelibly to all who came after him. 'For Friendship Such an Immeasurable Desire' evokes a universal feeling, a feeling of everyone, young and old, cis and trans, of and without color, gay, lesbian, straight, queer, top, bottom, side, non-binary... keep discovering! De Haan found his own most intimate friendships and desires among older and younger men. His poems do not exclude anyone. Friendship and desire belong to everyone. They don't leave out anyone.

'For friendship, such an immeasurable desire' deserves to be said loudly by the reader to pass on to LGBTI people, queers and other sexual asylum seekers who continue to come after him - after us.

Mattias Duyves, Amsterdam, 25-05-2024