



**Jolande Withuis, *Raadsvader: Kind in de Koude Oorlog*<sup>1</sup> (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2018, 254 pp., ISBN 9789403106007).**

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It is a well-known fact that an unhappy childhood is like a goldmine for a writer. But the question is whether Jolande Withuis' childhood was an unhappy one. This is not something that can be easily judged. However, in trying to determine this, it is crucial to consider the author's opinion, experiences and memories. As an adult, Jolande Withuis experienced psychological problems and panic attacks, and had to go to therapy. While this could be considered proof of her unhappiness as her problems in the present were directly related to her childhood, it is interesting to note that the impression you get from the book is somewhat deviant. In her biography of her father, her childhood does not seem entirely unhappy and her father does not come across as unpleasant.

Born in 1949, Withuis was the oldest of two children and the only daughter. During the 1950s and 1960s, this small familial structure was quite uncommon in the Netherlands. At the time, most families (often Catholics and Protestants) were large and couples did not seldom have five or more children. In the aftermath of the Second World War (until the beginning of the 1960s), poverty was rife in the Netherlands, and many Dutch families faced numerous hardships. Fewer children often meant that families faced fewer difficulties, which resulted in a more peaceful family life. This was certainly the case for the Withuis family. Although the family was still poor by the early 1960s, when other families slowly started to recover financially thanks to the Marshall Plan and the development of the welfare state, they were a harmonious family and did not quarrel. Dad was frequently absent but generally kind when he was at home and his daughter adored him. Mum was a busy housewife who took good care of the household and children. She was also a good seamstress and made clothes for her children, so that they were always neatly dressed. She passed this skill on to her daughter. Mum was also well-organized and managed to secure a shower cabin for their home.

Withuis and her brother got along well, and her parents took pride in and cherished their children. The children were encouraged to develop themselves and were sent to a good school, despite their parents' poverty. Withuis attended the prestigious Barlaeus Gymnasium (grammar school) in their home town of Amsterdam, and, unlike many other girls her age, was not given chores after school to help her mother. Her father, who had attended a lower-level secondary school as a teenager, sometimes helped her with her maths and languages homework.

### FIGHTING CULTURE

This, however, is only one aspect of this family's culture. The Withuis family differed from most other families because they belonged to a communist minority. In the book, Withuis suggests that this was the root of many of her problems later in life.

Withuis is well-known in the Netherlands as a professional historian, sociologist and author of several award-winning historical books and biographies. Her first acclaimed work was her much-praised doctoral dissertation *Opoffering en heroïek* (Sacrifice and heroism) from 1990, in which she investigated the mentality and political culture of the Nederlandse Vrouwen Beweging (Dutch Women's Movement).<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1946, this organization was originally meant to attract Dutch women in general. However, many of its members were communists and the Cold War was unfolding at the time, leading to increasing animosity between communists and non-communists, and the organization became an undercover CPN (Dutch communist party) organization. Its mentality was representative of communist women all over Europe — Withuis frequently refers to British examples. This book gives the reader a glimpse into and a greater understanding of communist thoughts on politics, but also on daily life during this period, and provides the perfect backdrop for Withuis' biography.

As with most sectarians, communist women's ideologies were indisputable and they lived according to a fixed set of rules. The non-communist world was thought of as the enemy, but the communists were unfazed as they considered themselves superior: they had the truth. Withuis calls this a "fighting culture". Isolation and poverty were a worthy price to pay. Theoretically, men and women were considered equal. In practice, however, most men were breadwinners and most women were housewives and mothers, as was the case in the greater part of the western world. The difference was that communist women carried a double burden. In addition to housework some women had paid jobs, as encouraged by communist ideology and/or for financial reasons. Over and above this, women

were often in charge of political activities and other activities to serve the communist cause. Husband and wife were partners in the struggle. Gender differences, let alone inequality, were not acknowledged. In some respects, the communists were more progressive than many of their fellow countrymen and women. They fought against the law of legally incapacitated married women (abolished in the Netherlands in 1956) and the rule which placed the husband at the head of the household (abolished in 1971). They also supported a liberal regime regarding contraceptives. Dutch society was mainly strict in these areas until the 1960s. Because many of the communist families were small, the Withuis family structure fit into a wider pattern.

These communist women in general did not complain about their double burden. Politically, they fought for collective facilities like nurseries, laundries and restaurants. They did not call on their husbands for help. It was a “question of toughness” and “prudent arrangements” (p. 304). They were hard on each other and on themselves: everything for the good cause. Emotions, individual feelings and hardships were not acknowledged. Having read Withuis’ doctoral dissertation and considering the Cold War setting of this book, one is not surprised about the message Withuis conveys in her latest book. Although this is a biography of her father in the first place, indirectly it is also an autobiography. Readers need to be more than critical of the facts. An autobiography can foremost be considered a mirror of the author’s views. However, Withuis’ story is highly plausible. The book was prompted by the death of her father in 2009, who was then 89 years old. She realised that she knew very little about him and started to investigate his life. With the help of her mother and brother, other family members, and acquaintances, and files manufactured by the Dutch secret service, she succeeded in painting a fascinating portrait of her father and of her own childhood.

## FATHER

Withuis’ father, Berend Jan (later Berry) was born in Zutphen, a small town in the east of the Netherlands, in 1920. He grew up in a Protestant family, which, although not strictly religious initially, became more orthodox after his beloved father died. Berend Jan was twelve years old at the time. Among other things, his father taught him to play chess, which would fulfil a deciding role in his life. The death of his father in 1932 was rather traumatic for Berend Jan, and he turned away from his family (mother and sisters) and lost his faith in God. He was very intelligent, good at languages and began writing stories at an early age. Luckily for him, he continued to play chess with help from an uncle. Later, he

became fascinated by communist ideology, presumably as compensation and comfort for his unhappiness and the loss of his faith. During the Second World War, he became a member of the illegal CPN. As with many other communists, he became active in the resistance during the war. There is not much detail on this part of his life in the book, as he rarely spoke about it afterwards, which is not uncommon among people who have suffered traumatic experiences. They push the memory away to survive. His role as a communist during the war forms part of the mystery and intrigue that surrounds him. She discovered that he had been sent to Germany by the Dutch communists, to spy on German activities. He stayed in the Ruhr area, in the city of Bochum, and survived a heavy bombardment. Immediately after the war, he was appointed chief editor of a regional edition of the Dutch communist newspaper *De Waarheid* (The Truth), which was widely circulated at the time. The heroic behaviour of the communists during the resistance, combined with the fact that the Soviet Union was temporarily counted as a liberating country, made their supporters popular. Working for the newspaper, he met his future wife, Jenny, a secretary, who would stand beside him for the rest of his career and his life.

## FEAR

At this point, the story becomes one of a post-war life overshadowed by fear due to increasing tensions between communists and the rest of western society during the Cold War, from the late 1940s to the late 1960s. *De Waarheid* soon had far fewer readers and lost its regional editions, surviving only in the capital. The Withuis children were told by their parents that the outside world considered them the enemy, which was indeed the case. Their father, although a pleasant man, was ideologically steadfast, and could become angry during discussions on politics. However, there were happier and less fearful times as well. Withuis found she was warmly received by her father's non-communist family back in Zutphen. There, she was not the enemy and was treated as a normal child. However, it was not enough compensation for the overall cold climate of her childhood. Withuis writes that, as a five-year old girl, she fell and hurt her head. No one tried to help her and she did not even consider asking the nearby adults for help. Instead, she ran home as fast as she could, with her hand covering the wound. The communist mentality dictated that she should not feel afraid, as feelings were not considered important or appropriate for a 'fighting spirit'. As a result, she was not hugged by her parents. In the 1950s, this was not exceptional, but it contributed greatly to her feelings of insecurity and anxiety.

1956 was a deciding year. The Cold War reached its peak and the Soviets invaded Hungary to crush the ongoing rebellion. Because the CPN supported the invasion, communists were increasingly isolated and hated more than ever by the Dutch public. Their party building in Amsterdam, in which Berry Withuis worked as editor for the communist newspaper, was attacked. His wife barricaded their own home. Although they were not hurt, the experiences themselves were frightening and horrifying. Seven-year-old Withuis, however, accepted the events as matter-of-fact, especially because her parents did not talk about them. It was the proverbial elephant in the room. They would maintain this attitude of toughness and silence throughout her youth.

Her father was also silent about another important event in the same year, 1956. At a party conference, Soviet leader Nikita Chroesjtjow spoke about the many crimes against humanity that their former honoured leader, Joseph Stalin, had committed during his long reign. This was a serious attack on the belief of many communists all over Europe. A number of them, including Dutch communists, who had remained stalwarts throughout the Second World War and the following Cold War, fell into crisis and collapsed. Others would not believe it. The Dutch communist party split and grew even smaller than it already was. What did Withuis' father do? Although he did not leave the party, he resigned as editor of *De Waarheid*. In the book Withuis attempts to explain her father's reasons for doing so, with the help of her mother, who in retrospect declared that her father could not stand it anymore. Could not stand what? The party climate, the low quality of the newspaper articles, the small readership? His belief in the Marxist-Leninist ideology was not shaken, or at least it did not appear that way. Withuis does not provide a clear answer, but hints at possibilities. As a communist, her father did not have many opportunities to make a living, because it was forbidden for the likes of him to be in the civil service. However, he had continued to play chess and decided to make a living from that. He became a chess journalist for several important Dutch newspapers and foreign media and he organized international chess events. Berry Withuis had to earn money for his family and realized that he could fulfil a role in the chess world and Russia was considered to be the most influential country for chess. As his daughter comments, he mastered the Russian language. But even more importantly, he was a member of the communist party that was loyal to the Soviet Union. This made it easier for him to invite important Russian chess players like Botwinnik, Petrosjan, Tal and Spasski to the Netherlands. This was thus a way out for him that he would not have had if he had quit the party. At the same time, as his daughter rightly comments, the chess world provided a far more pleasant environment than the strict communist party culture he had escaped.

## AFTERMATH

After having been a member of the CPN herself for a few years as a student, Withuis developed psychological problems, lost her faith in the communist ideology and quit the party. In the 1980s she started to critically research the communist world as a scholar. Her doctoral dissertation was ill-received in communist circles, but her father was silent about it, and there were some indications that he was proud of her. His last years were spent in his home town of Zutphen, where his daughter also lived at the time. He was financially more secure than before, became a more convivial person and showed signs of being happier with life. However, the mystery remained. With her book, his daughter succeeded in lifting the veil to a large extent, but not completely. The reader is interested to know more about the relationship between her psychological problems and her youth. What exactly was the part played by communist culture in general or were her problems mainly caused by her father (and mother) being silent about it? However, the great merit of this work is the insight into communist culture and the impact it had on the lives of some of its adherents.

## NOTES

- 1 Mysterious father. Child during the Cold War.
- 2 Jolande Withuis, *Opoffering en heroïek. De mentale wereld van een communistische vrouwenorganisatie in naoorlogs Nederland 1946–1976* (Amsterdam/Meppel: Boom 1990).