Letter from Amsterdam

Dirk van Weelden

Essay – November 1, 2009

Dear Gerry,

Thank you for your kind e-mail messages and the package with delicious things that you sent us. Please forgive me for being so slow and not answering by e-mail, but it's better for me to send you this letter on paper through our own people. My work for the armed resistance makes it too dangerous to use electronic post for personal messages. I would not be able to write freely.

To start with the best news: Laura and I are healthy, our things are safe in an as yet undamaged warehouse in the Westelijk Havengebied and our house in the Rivierenbuurt is intact. We live in an area where there is still hardly any fighting and where the regime so far has displayed little enthusiasm for purging it. Perhaps this has to do with the Second World War, when so many Jews were deported from this neighbourhood. It would raise too many bad memories.

Like I said, we cleared out most of our valuable possessions, like the books, Ma's grand piano, Laura's jewellery, the silverware and the art and have stashed them safely away. It's much too dangerous to have all that stuff in the house; we live in our apartment with the feeling that we can flee any day, if necessary, with an overnight bag with some clothes and a toothbrush. The bags are packed and ready to go, under the coat rack in the hall.

Many people in Amsterdam are taking advantage of the chaos caused by the civil war for their own ill purposes. In Buitenveldert, bands suddenly started going around and chasing people out of their houses, looting the premises and, after a few blows here and there and a gang rape or two, moving on again. Minibuses towing furniture trailers drove along with them at a footpace in order to carry off the booty. Sometimes they set fire to the houses, sometimes not. When they didn't, it turned out they had made an agreement with the so-called 'Restoration Agents', usually collaborationist notaries, who redistribute the houses of public enemies at the order of the regime. As a matter of fact, most of the addresses the plunderers went to were on a list that the new Minister of the Interior had sent to the Chief of Police of Amsterdam-Amstelland. That's why there's been so little uproar and why the police are only symbolically working on the case. They have plenty of excuses for not having any time. They were called in to maintain order behind the advancing troops when the battle over the Zuidas suddenly broke out and were also requisitioned for Amsterdam East, after the Marines revolted.

I read that a resistance group in Amsterdam North is considering a disciplinary campaign against a band that is causing automobile accidents on the A10 ring road in order to rob the victims. It's discouraging to see how similar those plans are to the emergency legislation that the regime is enacting against us.

Ever since the tourists have been staying away and most of the ex-pats have left, there is a miserable feeling of boredom in the city. As if even the daylight is murky and dim. New ads only appear on the squares and the large thoroughfares. In the rest of the city, the sales, models and packaging are from a year or two ago. The photos are wrinkled by the rain that has seeped into the glass cases. The bright colours are faded, the hairdos of the models looked dated. The world in which those posters belong no longer exists.

The city does not maintain its status any more; there is hardly any upkeep. Even the woodwork on the luxury stores in the Nine Streets is peeling. And all of this is extra noticeable because the streets are so empty – and because a third of the shops have gone bust by now or are open just a few days a week.

In the outdoor cafés, you see only young Amsterdammers, who probably sit there in order to keep an eye on the street for their organization or to make a deal.

The alleys next to the busier streets and canals are piled with garbage. Even the municipal workers don't like to go in them anymore. Three of the four safe houses that we have in the inner city are on such alleyways. When I walk into an alley it's as if the hand of a giant has picked me up and transported me back in time. For a moment, I'm in the years of the city's degeneracy, the late 1970s, early '80s. I talked to an old journalist who can hardly believe his own conclusion that Amsterdam has been more devastated in a year and a half than in the 150 years prior to that.

As everyone knows, the least chance of explosions, attacks and murders is on and around the Max Euweplein. The casino on that square is one of the most important economic hotspots in the city. Gambling is much more popular than ever – I think because most of the other pleasures have fallen away. But it's also the presence of large amounts of black money and the clandestine business and trading that is done around the casino that gives the Max Euweplein the function of a city centre. This is where the bigwigs of the regime are seen when they are in the city. Elsewhere in the city they don't feel at ease, but in this enclave of louche bling bling and swindle they feel at home.

The regime boasts that it is safe and peaceful around the Leidseplein and the Max Euweplein. But are the volunteers patrolling in their nationalistic uniforms and the heavily armed soldiers with their armoured vehicles on the Weteringschans and the Babylon complex also the boss? Since the introduction of the permit system for journalists, it's not easy to find out who's in charge here, but my impression is that it's primarily the businessmen from all sorts of countries who come to the city in the wake of the ambassador of the friendly Italian regime. They, and the crews of the companies they hire to do the dirty work. The local underworld and the boys and girls of neighbourhood gangs that deal in guns and drugs make up the rest of it. Besides broken English and Amsterdam patois you mostly hear Italian, Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian.

In the cafés around the Max Euweplein you can also find the foreign journalists, with their differing theories about the source of the money that the regime has at its disposal. Oddly, tax revenues have collapsed but the funds available to the armed forces apparently are inexhaustible.

I am regularly at the Max Euweplein because I also meet with an editor of my London publisher there. I give him USB sticks with stories and essays that I write in English. It's roundabout, but I don't want to risk sending my pieces by Internet. What's more, I publish under a pseudonym. Sometimes one of them gets published and then Jeff, my editor, can give me the money I earn from it – in cash, which is a welcome addition to the little that Laura and I make. As you know, she works as a cook. I'm now an employee at a large dry cleaner's.

Do you remember Harold? That big boorish guy who had a gallery on the Lijnbaansgracht. I think you once bought that drawing with the skaters in it from him, the one that you had hanging on the long wall of your living room. Anyway, this week he suddenly appeared in the dry cleaner's, bringing a pair of trousers, a jacket, suit and a couple of skirts. He looked unhealthy. Red eyes, puffy. He said that besides the gallery he was doing something much more lucrative: selling valuable watches. My not exactly enthusiastic reaction must have shown him I was irritated by the umpteenth bragging story of somebody who is trying to

profit from the war. I quickly began to talk about his wife, who was a social worker and probably suffering a lot under the new regime.

Harold burst out in raw, mirthless laughter. She had been interned, and after being interrogated was released. She did lose her job, however. The service at which she worked was located in a 'black district' and declared unnecessary. In the very next breath, he went on to complain about the vigilante groups who were opposing the regime. Why didn't they let the government make a clean sweep, then the repression would automatically lessen and everything could be like it used to be. Living in prosperity, peace and harmony. A provocation. He was not at all surprised to find me working in a dry cleaner's. So he had known all along that I had been fired from the university.

'Harold,' I said, 'little people like you and me have to sit tight and wait it out, try to save our own necks and take care of our loved ones and only join in the discussion again when the madness is over.'

He slammed the money against the counter with his broad, swollen paw.

'Play-actor,' he growled and I gave him the stapled together tickets with a vague smile.

The trains are running again, as I'm sure you've heard. Here you immediately notice it on the street. There are people with maps in their hands walking around again. The shopkeepers are happy about these courageous visitors. Usually they are people looking up their families or coming to do business.

It took months after the bombardment of the Marine Establishment and the devastation of the Eastern Islands in Amsterdam, but now it's once again possible to travel to the south and east of the country by train. The revolt of the Marines and the Marine Intelligence Service headquartered there did give us hope. Luckily, they were clever enough to smuggle out most of the weapons and vital technical systems before openly turning against the regime. We have already had contact with a few of their commanders and they have a couple of bases near the Rai and in Amsterdam North. I expect a lot from working together with them and who knows, maybe they will succeed in persuading other branches of the armed forces to choose our side.

The evacuation and total destruction of the districts neighbouring the Marine bulwark was a typical example of the misbegotten enthusiasm of the regime. Just ask the Kattenburgers camping in the tents in the Vliegenbos Park whether they consider punishing rebellious marines important enough to blast their houses to bits.

With typical bombast, the regime offered the people from Wittenburg, Kattenburg and Oostburg new apartments on Java Island. After all, plenty of apartments would be freed up after the intellectuals who have been singled out as 'enemies of freedom' or 'agents of Islamo-fascism' were arrested. But then the troops of the regime would have to pacify Java Island first. If it's up to us, that will never succeed. What's more, there are far too many people without a roof over their head.

Yesterday, our group was involved in an over-water attack on the Silodam on the river IJ. There's a company in that building that does research for the regime into the antecedents of subversive activities on the Internet. No security or defences could be discerned, probably because they assumed that no one knew about their freelance work for the AIVD. Our intelligence is very good; we even have moles in the Ministry.

We came from three different directions in canoes painted black with powerful and silent – because they were electric – outboard motors. From less than thirty meters away, we shot two RPGs into the building and lobbed a big phosphor grenade after it to cause an extremely hot fire and thus maximum damage. Our canoes vanished just as quickly in

three different directions. No telephonic, radiographic communication had been necessary to plan and carry out the attack. A successful operation, with a quick exit and no traces left.

This was not a solo action by our group. We worked with the Fighting Designers, a group of radicalized designers who seldom engage in armed conflict, by the way, but who lately, especially after the destruction of the eastern islands, Oostelijkeilanden, recognize the necessity to also sabotage the regime by physical means. They provided a skipper, the camouflage clothing and treated the hulls of the canoes so that they are quieter in the water and do not reflect light. I was one of the skippers, and one of the marksmen was ours; we also supplied the canoes. The rocket launchers and the other members of the six-man special commando came from the Amsterdam branch of the Turkish communist party.

The water police and the army still have found no answer to our speedy canoes. We were able to sail into the Haarlemmervaart unhindered and under the cover of darkness reach our hiding place in the Bretten district.

Every week in Café Oostoever, a splendid white concrete 1950s café that overlooks the waters of the Sloterplas in an area that is firmly in the hands of anti-regime militias, I join a think tank of people who discuss peace. We don't talk about how and when peace will come. Meetings about that are held in other places. We consider the problems and possibilities for the city once the regime has been beaten.

One of the leading figures is Bas G., an architect and urban designer. Right before the civil war broke out, he had built his own house on IJburg, and after that island was purged (from which he had a lucky escape) he can only come to the suburbs in the West via secret routes and with false identity papers. He leads an apparently unsuspicious life as a town hall employee who records the city's housing situation. I admire the sangfroid with which he looks at the ticklishness of his daily life from the point of view of the long term. We protect him and his family, but we do this in exchange for information that is valuable for combating and sabotaging the regime.

He always claims that the civil war will turn out to be such a horrible trauma for the Dutch that they will rise above themselves trying to rid themselves of the memory. 'It will better here than it ever was before,' he says nonchalantly, 'not necessarily wealthier, but more lively, international, inventive. In some sectors, such as software, sustainable technology, engineering, we can become world leaders. The difference will lie in rediscovering sharpness and fighting spirit. There will be something to prove. The feeling that we now have of standing with our backs against the wall and seeing everything go to pot will soon give us tremendous energy. A whole lot of crap will disappear like snow under the sun.'

When he talks about the future it calms me down. That's necessary, because the situation can make me desperate. After all, I am participating in the fight against the regime without having an explicit ideology. My loved ones and I are outlawed, considered suspicious and designated as enemies of the people. I was fired and spied upon like a criminal on probation. The reaction was instinctive and intense. I joined a group that is primarily engaged in sabotage, but sometimes also with armed combat.

I am not always completely convinced of the rightness of what we are doing, in the service of which all those terrible things occur, the attacks, the raids, the fires. Hasn't it been true for some time that there are not only two, but four, or maybe even six, parties confronting each other in this mess? A month ago, jihadists from Amsterdam West blew up two commanders of The True Patriots from the Pijp district and bragged about it to boot. Left a gigantic crater on the Fredriksplein. And last week I heard the rumour that the raid on the Social Security office in Amsterdam North was given away by a splinter faction of a Jewish action group. Doesn't this seem more like a war between mafia organizations than a fight

for liberation?

How do I know, for example, where the money that pays for our group is coming from? Sometimes we have Israeli weapons, at other times American, but also Belgian and Italian ones. It's also never been completely clear to me how much influence our cell's discussions have on the organization's choices of targets and times. Often I have the impression that they couldn't care less about what we say or think. It could be that behind the organization is an Italian real estate investor who wants to buy a certain section of the city, whether it be for a good price or even destroyed and thus ripe for development.

Laura says at such moments that I should drink herbal tea and get more sleep. Every now and then I think about disappearing to Germany, where it's still a little bit civilized. But those thoughts don't often occur to me after I've spent an evening in Café Oostoever. Bas is able to convince me to stay despite everything. Amsterdam is such a special city in his stories that I want to stay here and fight for it.

This week I was in one of the high-rises in the Zuidas district. The air above the city is different than it used to be. Actually you always see a fire smouldering in a few places in your view. Trails of smoke ranging from dirty yellow to deep black. The difference is even greater when you look down at the city. The bust up roads, the destroyed housing blocks, the roadblocks. The picturesque look and hip international atmosphere is gone, but you do see a tough, sturdy urban structure that can't be messed with that easily. When I looked down at the battered city of Amsterdam I know for sure that we will drive the regime out.

Every day I ride to work on my scooter and pass no less than 18 roadblocks. At ten of them at the least, I am stopped and searched. The weird thing is that I can drive from my house to the Vijzelgracht without a problem, whereas the Rivierenbuurt actually is not occupied by any faction at all at the moment. The centre is indeed in the hands of the regime, but I know for sure that three resistance groups have important bases there. And sometimes we simply make a hit, like when we killed four advisors, among them the great leader's speechwriter, who had gone to a discount computer shop on the Koningsplein. The doors suddenly closed and our people came in from the back garden. The three bodyguards were much too late. Burly farm boys in the big city, they had been gaming.

When I go to see Steef and Ben in the Transvaal neighbourhood, I have to take a detour via the Ceintuurbaan and the Wibautstraat because the Berlage Bridge has been blown up. That was inescapable when we took the Amstel Station, where there were a few trains loaded with weapons and ammunition. Otherwise we would have been attacked from the rear.

But anyway, what I wanted to say is that despite all the havoc and the look of the battlefield, that's the direction I take when I tootle along on my scooter to Steef and Ben on the Steve Bikoplein. They stop me 15 times on this route too, but I look too nondescript, and apparently the profession I once practiced, the history of science, is not suspicious enough to earmark me as an 'intellectual opposed to liberty'.

Gerry, the situation is wretched and disastrous, as you can see, but we haven't had to eat the cats yet and the chance of a blanket bombardment is zilch. If nutters break into the laboratories of the VU and the UvA in order to commit biological terrorist attacks with a couple of test tubes, I'm out of here. Or if the regime lines up its tanks in the Rijnstraat and opens fire on the houses. But I don't see that happening very soon as yet.

Keep your chin up there in Wierden. As far as I know it's a fairly comfortable area to be in during these years of national catastrophe. I'm glad you are there. Say hello to Leo and the children. If you want to send something from the garden again, we would be very grateful. And finally, what's most important of all, thanks for offering to take us in, if life becomes

impossible here. I am well aware of how big a risk that is for you. For what it's worth, dear sister, I would do the same for you and yours. Let's hope that it will never be necessary. If it becomes unacceptably dangerous for me here, you will receive a message from our people that we are coming. For now, I am trying to stay here in the city as long as possible. It's terrible to have to say it, but never have I loved Amsterdam as much as I do now, when the city is partly in ruins, ripped up by bulldozers and tanks, mutilated by roadblocks and torn apart by factions shooting at each other.

Hugs from your brother Koos

and from Laura

Dirk van Weelden (the Netherlands) is a writer.

Tags

Urban Space

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