NETHERLANDS: THE SECOND LIBERATION

Roel van Duijn

The Hague, 1960. During recess, my school friends and I happened to see a photograph of an old philosopher, Bertrand Russell, being picked up by the police in Trafalgar Square. He was taking part in a sit-in against the atomic bomb. Not long afterward, we blockaded traffic during the morning rush hour, sitting on the asphalt at the intersection of Javastraat and Anna Pavlonastraat—it was on the way to our Montessori Lyceum—and chanting: "Ban the bomb!"

I can still see us sitting on the asphalt that morning and blocking cars with our banners, and one hour later being literally dragged to court by the police to account for our defiant act. I felt a shock of rebellion when I read that atomic bombs were going to be stored in the Netherlands, too. We were war children, raised in the conviction that now, after fascism and violence, an age of peace must dawn.

My friend Peter Schröder and I made our first pamphlet. "Don't turn the world into Hiroshima" it read in orange letters. We pasted the pamphlets on bus shelters in fashionable neighborhoods using wallpaper paste. We were seventeen. The police carried us off in trucks. In my defense, I appealed to the unwritten laws of conscience borrowed from Cicero, but this did not make much of an impression on the judges.

Becoming a professional revolutionary

On a fiercely cold winter day, my friend Hans Korteweg and I sputtered to Amsterdam on his moped to organize the next demonstration. We skipped out of school to do this; I sat behind him and got very cold. I called my father from a houseboat. "You get back here, young man!" his voice cracked. "I've got just four hundred guilders left in the bank, and I'm sick. The principal of your school just called and told me that I had a choice between sending you to a psychiatrist or taking you out of school. So if you don't get back here right now, they're going to throw you out." "No," I replied resolutely, "I have an important political mission."

When I finally did come home, my father did not say a word. I felt his despair and anger, but also his concealed admiration. It did not break my heart that Hans and I had been thrown out of the

gymnasium, even though it was only a couple of months before final exams. I carried on unflinchingly, agitating against the A-bomb mentality. My father did not know what to do, but I did: I got my hands on some yellowed books by the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin and Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, the savior of the working class, and I set out to become a professional revolutionary.

On the first day at my new school, the Dalton Lyceum, I noticed with pride that our opponents had scribbled "Van Duijn go home!" to greet me on the outside wall. After that the man in the wood veneer double bed in the bedroom next to mine kicked the bucket. At his graveside I said, "Bye, Dad."

"Provotariat" instead of proletariat

In 1963, when finals were over, I moved to Amsterdam. There I became a creature of my own making: a "Provo." I started working on the assembly line at the Amstel Brewery, screwing caps on bottles to earn money for a typewriter. I had learned from the anarchists that the revolution would start with the working class, but when I asked my new coworkers what they thought of having their money sent home without having to work for it, their answer disappointed me. They said they would miss their work, the purpose of their lives. I concluded that we were not going to get any revolution from the proletariat. We would need something else: the "provotariat" —the masses of rebellious youth, the idle riffraff, who were not afraid of a little rough-and-tumble.

Once I had my typewriter, the pamphlets and manifestos simply flew out of the house. We organized nightly happenings against "the addicted consumer" of tomorrow and brought new life to anarchism. I pasted a percussion cap in all three hundred copies of the first issue of *Provo*. "Grab a hammer and start the revolution in your own life with a bang!" I wrote underneath. In no time, the police were at the door. All of my materials, including the mimeograph machine, were confiscated. From then on, we could no longer keep up with the demand for our new magazine.

The white bicycle plan

Then we launched the white bicycle plan to put thousands of rental bikes on the street, free for anyone to use. We believed it was the city's job to maintain them. But when we publicly painted the first bicycles white near the Lieverdje statue on the Spui square, the

police confiscated them. Professional revolutionary—can you still aspire to such a thing? Not that it was all that common back then, but in leftist circles it was something that exuded excitement, and that is why I wanted to be one so badly.

The Provo Movement's "White Bicycle Plan" in 1966 sought to provide thousands of white bicycles to the public in Amsterdam free of charge.

A professional revolutionary derived his prestige from more than giving incendiary speeches, writing subversive articles, and convening demonstrations and happenings. Part of it involved going to jail from time to time for organizing illegal gatherings or inciting subversive behavior—maybe for handing out currants, symbols of love, in public; or for walking down the street with a blank banner, even though demonstrations of any kind had been forbidden there; or for throwing a smoke bomb at the carriage of a just-married princess.

Solidarity in the House of Detention

I once spent five weeks in the House of Detention on the Leidseplein. There I could do a little extra reading (I did not have to work because the authorities feared that I would incite others to protest against the Vietnam War). Late Saturday evenings there was always a happening, and I could hear people chanting for my liberation outside: "Free Roel! Free Roel!" All the prisoners beat out the rhythm of the chant on the heating pipes so that the building shook. Once a week we were allowed to write a censored letter, and once a week we could have a visit from a girlfriend in the presence of a guard. The advantage of all this was that when we were back on the street, we could stare at the pedestrians and the Number 10 tram line with the happy feeling of freedom.

A professional revolutionary would go right back to work, however. The next issue of *Provo* had to come out; currants had to be distributed next to the Lieverdje statue, the little street urchin

who symbolized, for us, the Addicted Consumer of Tomorrow, or a council of the international provotariat had to be convened. As professional revolutionaries, we were full-time Provos, full-time *Kabouters* [Dutch leprechauns, mischief-makers], and we made a living from it by giving interviews and lectures and by writing articles. In principle, we shared everything. At any given moment, our comrades could burst into our house and open the bread box or sleep in our bed. We could not get jealous because jealousy in love killed creativity. Or maybe not? My good relationship with my girlfriend grew free and ever freer.

Provo in the city council

I became a writer, councilman, alderman, and farmer. As a councilman, I did have to come up with a theory, of course: the two-hand doctrine. That meant working in the system with one hand and stirring up trouble via extra-parliamentary movements with the other. Naturally, we came up against authorities like Amsterdam mayor Gijs van Hall. "Van Hall ten val!" [Down with Van Hall] was our motto. And sure enough, the government dismissed him: they thought Van Hall was not coming down hard enough on the protesters. This was the wrong reason, we thought, and so we started a counteraction: "Don't dump Van Hall!"—which put an end to the last hopes of Van Hall's supporters that he would get another chance. The humiliated city council had no choice but to start allowing happenings and demonstrations.

It was late 1966, a year and a half before the revolutionary events of Berlin and Paris. That winter, sympathetic students and other kindred spirits from various foreign capitals occasionally visited us. Many of them had read our pamphlet, "Call to the International Provotariat," which we had distributed in several languages as far as Russia.

"Provo is dead"

When the movement disbanded in May 1967, six years after the death of my father, I became ill. "Provo is dead," I mourned, feverishly searching for the next thing. I crawled into bed. I thought about my farewell to my father. What had happened to Provo? What was to become of the revolution now? I fretted about the world after Provo. The doctor tried aspirin and penicillin, but after three months he came to the conclusion that nothing was wrong with me. "Go do something completely different, Van Duijn," he said with a stroke of

genius. "Go work on a farm." Surprised, I set out on trembling legs. "Looverendale" organic whole wheat bread, which was produced on a farm on the island of Walcheren, was the only thing that occurred to me. The farmer agreed to allow me to be a volunteer apprentice—on the condition that I shave off my beard.

One evening, he and I walked through the fields, inspecting the weeds. In the neighboring field, a harvester was tearing at the potatoes. I asked him if we were going to get a monster like that to take care of our spuds. "No," he responded, sticking his chin into the evening glow. "Noisy machines chase away the kabouters, and we need them to keep our plants healthy."

Kabouter for the environment

I had found it! I shook hands with the farmer and left. In the train, I wrote a manifesto about the need for a Kabouter State. Human beings had to become cultural kabouters. As cultural kabouters, the new race would be able to restore balance with nature.

It was 1969, the end of a decade that had changed the Netherlands into a living democracy; a decade in which we, too, had exerted an unexpected but inspiring influence in Europe. For many people, the 1960s marked a second liberation. After having been freed from the Nazi occupation in 1945, we had now freed ourselves from the stuffy atmosphere of authority. Just recently, I read that the white bicycle plan is being introduced in Berlin, Paris, and Copenhagen.

Roel van Duijn founded the anarchistic Provo Movement in the '60s in Amsterdam. Now he is a member of the district council in Amsterdam Oud Zuid and an adviser to the lovelorn.