

## *Chapter Eighteen*

### **"Ik Vertrek": Some Trends in Recent Emigration from the Netherlands**

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The Dutch interest in emigration has shown a marked increase in the last ten years. "Ik Vertrek" is a popular Dutch reality show which follows current emigrants through their migration experience. This show examines the intentions and aspirations of their fellow citizens; it follows them through their adventures and misfortunes, shows them assimilating into their new habitat, and then displays the final outcome of their decision to emigrate.

The show opens on the eve of the emigration; it is a familiar scenario. The emigrants explain why they want to leave the Netherlands and which goals they want to realize in their new country. We see their goodbyes to their colleagues and family and the actual start of their migration. We next observe them arriving in their new environment. Most of the emigrants aspire to establish a tourism-related business: a campground, a hotel, or a bed-and-breakfast. They have sold their home, and now it is necessary to reinvest all of that capital in their new business. In many cases they have to renovate old buildings before they can actually welcome their first guests and start earning money. They suffer many hardships during the first year in their new home, some of which may not have occurred if they had been more thoroughly prepared for their migration. Most emigrants say that they don't regret their decision to move, but some of them are obliged to return to the Netherlands because of financial or personal setbacks.

"Ik Vertrek" is an expression of a remarkable trend in Dutch migration figures. Between 2003 and 2007, for the first time since the 1950s, the Netherlands had a rise in emigration. Although most of these emigrants are former immigrants to the Netherlands who return to their country of origin, there are also a substantial number of native citizens who are leaving. According to recent research,<sup>1</sup> the new emigrants have very different motives from those who left the country to emigrate to Canada and Australia in the 1950s. Whereas the traditional emigrants were in search of a better life for themselves and their children, the modern emigrant is predominantly dissatisfied with contemporary society. In "Ik Vertrek," characters complain about overpopulation, criminality, restrictive regulations, and the bad behavior of the Dutch. People who leave the country are in search of the good life, tranquillity, space, nature, and friendly people. Earning more money is not important; one-third of the emigrants expect that

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<sup>1</sup> Harry P. van Dalen and Kène Henskens, *Weg uit Nederland—Emigratie aan het begin van de 21<sup>e</sup> eeuw* (Amsterdam: KNAW Press, 2008).

their income will decrease. Quality of life is in most cases more important than level of income.<sup>2</sup>

Recent Dutch emigrants mainly go to other European countries (69 percent between 1999 and 2006).<sup>3</sup> For many of them, emigration means moving to a place only ten to twenty kilometers outside the Dutch borders, to Belgium or Germany. In most cases they continue their social life and even their jobs in the Netherlands and don't see themselves as emigrants. About 31 percent decide to move to other European countries, whereas only 15 percent emigrate overseas, to the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. France and Spain are very popular.

### *Emigration of farmers*

Whereas emigration had formerly been popular among non-farmers, the popularity among farmers has diminished because of rising prices of land. In the 1990s emigration among farmers was widespread. About three hundred farmers left the Netherlands each year. Ten years ago, when we listened to emigration consultants and estate agents, we learned that more than four thousand farmers had serious emigration plans. According to an opinion poll taken in 1999, 21 percent of all Dutch farmers intended to leave the country.<sup>4</sup> What was the reason for this wave of emigration, and to which countries did Dutch farmers emigrate?

### *Emigration in the 1950s*

When we speak about emigration, many people in the Netherlands will remember their uncles and aunts who went to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in the 1950s. They left the country because they were dissatisfied with the situation in which they lived. Negative experiences from the economic depression of the 1930s and the German occupation in the 1940s were still vivid. Furthermore, there was no expectation that the standard of living would improve soon. In 1947, more than 70 percent of the population held the view that their standard of living was worse than before the war. In addition, Dutch farmers had specific problems. For young farmers it was almost impossible to start their own business. Expansion of cultivated land through land reclaiming could not solve the problem. Furthermore, many farmers resisted taking a non-agrarian profession. Supported by consultants from emigration offices, thousands of farmers left the country.

Most agrarian emigrants in the 1950s were young farmers who had to work as employees before they could start their own farm. Older farmers with large families wanted to succeed in giving their sons their own business. Because of exchange controls, possibilities for exporting their own capital were limited. Therefore, it was difficult for these emigrants to build up a good living. Only a quarter of the farmers who went to

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Giesen, "Weg uit dit akelige land," *De Volkskrant*, 23 February 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Harry P. van Dalen and Kène Henskens, "Ik vertrek, maar waarom? De emigratie van Nederlanders," *Me Judice*, 30 October 2008.

<sup>4</sup> EO-radio and LTO-Vastgoed, 1999.

Canada between 1947 and 1955 succeeded in obtaining their own farm. The majority of them found a non-agrarian profession.<sup>5</sup>

For most emigrants who left the Netherlands in the 1940s and 1950s, emigration was a choice of a lifetime. About 30 percent didn't succeed and came back.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the 1950s, emigration lost its attraction. Most young farmers found non-agrarian jobs, and for those who still wanted to farm, there were new chances. The rise of intensive livestock farming gave the opportunity to build up a good living on a limited area of land. It became easy to obtain credits and investment subsidies for building new stables. Those who emigrated already had family or friends in the land of their choice.

### *Restrictive agricultural policy and non-agricultural claims*

The main reason why many Dutch farmers intended to emigrate was closely connected with the change in agricultural policy. After World War II, the main goal was to produce sufficient food at low prices. In order to realize this, Dutch agriculture underwent a process of modernization. Small farms closed and medium-sized farms started a process of specialization and growth. The aim was to reduce costs so that it was possible to sell products for low prices. When the food shortage was over, Dutch farmers started to produce food for export. The realization of the European Common Market meant a giant stimulus for Dutch agriculture, especially the breeding of cattle, hogs, and poultry. In the 1960s and 1970s, factory farming appeared on the less fertile soils in the eastern and southern part of the Netherlands. In order to start a new hog or poultry farm, only a small strip of land—the location for building the shelters—was sufficient. The manure could be sold or given away to other farmers. Dairy farming also underwent a process of modernization and growth. In the 1950s, owning ten cows was enough to earn a living. Twenty-five years later, a farmer had more than seventy cows and a cow—compared to her ancestors—produced more than double the quantity of milk.

This development of Dutch agriculture had its price: overproduction, too much manure, and the high costs of financing European agricultural policy. In order to reduce the surplus, in 1984 the European Community introduced a levying on milk. Each farmer was given the right to produce a certain amount of milk. When he produced more, he would be penalized. Although this measure was in a way a blessing for many farmers, it was the first in a series of measures and rules that restricted the freedom of farming. After 1984, expansion was possible only through buying the right to produce from other farmers.

The most radical changes in Dutch agricultural policy were aimed at reduction of manure. In the last twenty years the Dutch government has tried to realize this by all means. The measures it took were not always successful. In the first ten years—between 1984 and 1994—the aim was to reduce the output of manure without reducing the livestock. Although hog farmers and agricultural industries put their hope in making

<sup>5</sup> Mari Smits, *Met kompas emigreren. Katholieken en het vraagstuk van de emigratie in Nederland (1946-1972)* (Nijmegen/s-Gravenhage: Katholiek Documentatie Centrum, 1989), 127.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Elich and P. W. Blauw, *Emigreren* (Utrecht/Antwerpen: Het Spectrum, 1983), 55-57.

new products out of manure, the government tried to impose an administrative system with the aim of controlling ingredients like phosphate and nitrogen. Farmers had to make new investments in order to reduce their stock's output, without the certainty that these investments would be sufficient. Farmers resisted, because all of these measures meant an encroachment on their freedom as entrepreneurs and made them uncertain about their future. After 1994 the government tried to realize its goals by reducing the livestock. As long as it was not possible to raise prices of meat—Dutch agriculture is dependent on the Common Market—reducing livestock meant decline of income. Whereas big farmers did have the capital to buy new licenses to own more animals, small farmers had no other choice but to terminate their business.

New investments were also necessary in order to comply with new rules in regard to the welfare of animals. These rules were the result of public criticism of the way animals were confined in modern farms. Laying batteries<sup>7</sup> will be forbidden in the near future and calves will have to be kept in bigger stalls. As with the measures to reduce manure, farmers have to make new investments without extra proceeds. The public criticism regarding animal welfare also has a psychological aspect. Although their animals are primarily a means of production, most farmers have an emotional bond with their animals. Farmers don't like to be criticized for the way they take care of them.

Not only have hog and poultry farmers had to cope with a restrictive agricultural policy, but for dairy farmers the reduction of the quantity of phosphate and nitrogen they could put on their pasture also brought problems. Those who wanted to expand were not only obliged to buy the license to produce more milk, they also had to buy more land. The big problem is that land is not easily available in a densely populated country. This brings us to another problem: non-agricultural claims on land. In densely populated areas of the Netherlands, farmers have to make room for new houses, motorways, railroads, and industrial zones. In other parts of the country—which was also the case with the popular marathon skater Evert van Benthem, who went to Canada—the government and environmental organizations buy farmers' land in order to transform it into new green areas. The possibility of starting a new farm or expanding an existing one is hardly available nowadays. The only regions where this is still possible are the less densely populated Northern provinces. Here we see a national variation on international migration: farmers from the western and southern parts of the country settle in the north and start a new farm. As a result, the traditional arable farming in this region makes room for dairy and hog farming.

Dutch agricultural policy of the last twenty-five years and the increasing non-agricultural claims on farmers' land has made the prospect of maintaining a farm highly unattractive. This situation has worsened even more through the way the government treated farmers who were struck by veterinary diseases. In 1997, after the outbreak of swine plague in the south of the Netherlands, the government made use of the crisis by

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<sup>7</sup> Laying batteries are industrial confinement systems used primarily for egg-laying hens. The use of this system has generated controversy between advocates for animal welfare and industrial egg producers. *Ed.*

preparing legislation that would make it possible to reduce the livestock dramatically. In 2001, after the eruption of hoof and mouth disease, many farmers had the impression that the government had only one goal: to get rid of them. In this climate, many Dutch farmers were thinking about their future. For many farmers—especially those who had small farms and older farmers without heirs—liquidation was the only option. Not surprisingly, many farmers made use of the recent “buying-up” regulations of the Ministry of Agriculture. Others—young farmers, older farmers with heirs, and financially strong farmers—considered emigration.

### *Settling abroad*

The first signs of a growing interest in emigration among farmers became manifest in the 1980s. A study published in 1989 by the Dutch Agricultural Economic Institute confirmed this. According to this study 17 percent of the farm owners surveyed occasionally toyed with the idea of emigrating. Five percent of them had inquired about emigration but had as yet no definite plans to settle abroad. They had attended an informational meeting, or they had travelled abroad in order to explore the possibilities of emigrating. One percent of the interviewed farmers had concrete plans.<sup>8</sup> The farmers considering emigration were younger, better educated, and owners of larger farms than those who had never thought about it. The group of farmers with thoughts about emigration specialized relatively often in intensive livestock farming. Nevertheless, most of them had a dairy farm.<sup>9</sup> The interviewed farmers were also asked about their reasons for considering emigration. Measures to curb production were mentioned most often as important. In addition, the uncertainty about future agricultural policy and high taxes scored high. A future for their children and the feeling that the Netherlands was overpopulated—arguments often mentioned in the 1950s—played only a modest role.

In the 1980s Dutch agricultural emigration was traditionally directed at countries outside Europe. Farmers were interested in countries to which members of their family or former neighbors had immigrated in the 1950s: Canada, the United States, Brazil, Australia, and New Zealand. According to the study cited above, more than 50 percent of the farmers who had gathered information about emigration were interested in Canada. Other countries traditionally considered for emigration were also mentioned. Interest in emigration to European countries was low.<sup>10</sup> If we look at the actual emigration figures we see a contradiction. Although the largest contingent went to Canada—sixty-one in 1988—Denmark<sup>11</sup> was also popular. Most of the eighty-five Dutch farmers who settled in Canada between 1985 and 1992 arrived in 1988 and 1989.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> J. H. A. Hillebrand, *Boeren en emigratie* (The Hague: LEI-publicatie, 1989), 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> B. M. Kamphuis, *Recente ontwikkelingen in de emigratie van agrariërs* (The Hague: LEI-DLO, 1992), 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Since 1989 the character of Dutch agricultural emigration has changed radically. Developments in Central and Eastern Europe, and above all, the reunification of Germany, have created new opportunities. A new study published in 1992 by the Dutch Agricultural Economic Institute confirmed a growing interest in emigration among Dutch farmers. Whereas measures to restrict production and to reduce the production of manure became more rigid, more farmers attended informational meetings about emigration and participated in study tours.<sup>13</sup> Unlike in the 1980s, most agricultural emigrants have migrated within Europe. In 1991, about thirty farmers went to France. Denmark had become less popular, but still absorbed ten farmers' families that year. Twenty farmers started a new enterprise in the former German Democratic Republic. Other destinations in 1991 were Belgium, Great Britain, Ireland, and southern European countries. The total agricultural emigration from the Netherlands to other European countries was estimated at one hundred to 125 holdings. Only forty farmers went to countries outside Europe. In 1991 about thirty farmers started a new life in Canada, half the number of three years earlier. The total number of agricultural emigrants was estimated at 150.<sup>14</sup>

From interviews with emigration consultants and estate agents the Agricultural Economic Institute we can distinguish four types of emigrants. The first and most important group was that of young farmers owning a modern farm. For them emigration was a challenge to build a larger and still more modern farm that offered themselves and their children enough opportunities for expansion. The second group consisted of older farmers with one or more children. They saw emigration as a solution for creating a good start for the next generation. Both groups—the young farmers and the old farmers with successors—had enough capital for settling abroad. The third group mainly consisted of farmers' sons lacking the money to start a farm in the Netherlands but seeing possibilities in other countries, sometimes after earning money on farms abroad. The fourth group was that of agricultural entrepreneurs starting a production unit abroad while keeping their enterprise in the Netherlands. They did this merely to take advantage of the lower costs of land and labor in foreign countries.<sup>15</sup>

#### Growing numbers

The expectation of the interviewed emigration consultants and estate agents that the emigration of Dutch farmers and horticulturalists would increase became reality. In 2000 about three hundred farmers left the country. Emigration consultants estimated the number of Dutch farmers who intended to emigrate as between four and five thousand. Dutch agricultural policy and the growing urbanization were the main reasons for emigration. All parts of the agrarian sector were represented: dairy farmers, pig and poultry farmers, arable farmers, and growers. Lower land prices made buying land in other countries very attractive.<sup>16</sup> After a decline in the early 1990s, Canada

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Zwolse Courant*, 31 January 2001.

reclaimed the magnet position among the emigration countries. From one hundred to 120 farmers' families moved to Canada each year since 2000. Most of these families had a big dairy farm. For hog and poultry farmers, Canada also had good possibilities.<sup>17</sup> Most emigrants started a new farm in provinces with large contingents of Dutch emigrants, like Ontario and Alberta. Between thirty-five and forty-five emigrants went to Denmark. Half of them were young farmers starting their first enterprise. France, where an equal number of emigrants started a new farm, was attractive because of low land prices. Their farms, however, were smaller. East Germany was attractive for big dairy farmers and hog farmers.<sup>18</sup>

In 2001, the expectation was that the emigration of Dutch farmers would continue. It was unlikely that developments in agricultural policy would change radically. The forecast was that former communist countries in central Europe would be attractive, especially because these countries would soon become members of the European Union. Because of rising prices, however, most European countries became less attractive, and as a result agrarian emigration diminished.

At the same time new trends became visible. For rich farmers, emigration wasn't necessarily a choice for a lifetime. They just started a new farm in another country, in Europe but also in Canada, without selling their old farm. These farmers travelled often between their old farm in the Netherlands and their new settlement in another country. This phenomenon is called "semigration." For farmers as well as non-farmers who have emigrated, the situation in their new native country could not have been as ideal as they had expected. Other countries also have incomprehensible regulations, criminality, and the potential for political instability. More emigrants will possibly return to the Netherlands in the near future. Furthermore, because of the rise of the global village, made possible through satellite TV, the Internet, and better travel opportunities, the need for integration into the country of arrival has diminished. Just as the decision to emigrate has become easier to realize—especially within the European Union—the same is true for the decision to return to the Netherlands.

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<sup>17</sup> Press report ANP, 1 November 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.