

Wageningen University During World War II – Hotel de Wereld Liberation Lecture 13 May 2014

By G.H.Bolt:

In 1942, two years after the start of the war, I finished high school in nearby Arnhem, and registered as a 17 year old freshman at Wageningen University. At the time University student-dwelling did not exist, so my parents thought I should start as an external student riding the hourly Arnhem-to-Wageningen bus and scout around for local living quarters after the winter session. I agreed easily for the bussing-operation, as the local student associations had all closed down because of German interference with student clubs.

Aside from the early rising necessary because of the bus leaving, the lecturing activities concerning the rather fundamental approach to science underlying the uniform university entrance level program in those days, plus afternoon practical, felt to me like entering real science after high school. Nevertheless I (and with me other first-year students) remained somewhat isolated from the clouds building up at the universities due to the Nazi occupation. We were usually with approximately 4 first year students together on the morning bus, so during day-time and practical periods there were ample opportunities for discussions with fellow students. On the bus I also befriended a young Wageningen Student who ended up later in the resistance in Friesland; our paths would cross again in later years.

Towards the end of this first term the horizon darkened further by indications that the German occupying forces was planning to recruit a substantial number of Dutch students for working in the German war industry. The uncertainty of university officials about the actual course planned by the German government, plus the reaction building up in the student body led to the early closing of the fall term of the Dutch universities on Dec. 14, 1942. Although I did not realize so at the time, this in fact terminated my formal participation in the Wageningen study program until my re-entry after the war.

The following months a further uncertainty arose because of the successful assault on the Dutch Nazi 'General Seyffardt', leading to *razzia's* (raids) by the German 'SD' at a number of universities. The social upheaval and turmoil eventually led to the appearance around mid-March 1943 of the so famous "loyalty declaration". Undoubtedly this was meant to provide the Nazi officials with a cause for division of the student body into two parts: those who signed could proceed with their studies, while the non-signing part would be called into the "Arbeitseinsatz" (forced labour) in the German war industry. In turn this led to a rather chaotic and disturbing month of April 1943, with many students looking for contacts and advice from professors and senior students what to do: sign or not-sign the declaration? The situation was quite absurd and insecure; sometimes the validity of a signed declaration was later recalled: I remember a meeting at the beginning of April of the then acting Rector Magnificus Mees with students asking about consequences of not-signing. The Rector Magnificus said that if they signed before April 10 he was sure that they could proceed with their study. Thereafter it would still be possible to sign, but he could not guarantee that this would ensure acceptance of the declaration.

(In the mean time the german "Higher SS; and Police commander Rauter" enforced a condition of "summary justice", and a week later (five May) all ex-students had to show up with the local Nazi Security Forces offices, and the ones that did so were transported via Ommen to Germany. The final results of this happening was, in round numbers: total students 15 000, divided over one quarter that submitted a valid loyalty declaration, one quarter left Holland to join the "Arbeitseinsatz", and half of all students managed to avoid participation in this ghastly german exercise.)

After the middle of May'43, I stayed home, and following the advice of more senior students, started with a period of self-study, with the help of some lecture stencil-texts and relevant books. Recalling this "post-loyalty declaration" period, that lasted to about September 1943 for me, I actually have rather pleasant memories. Presumably the fear and uncertainty of the previous period: as to "what would happen next?" had more or less subsided. There was one threatening letter at my home address signed by SS general Rauter, indicating that both my parents and myself would be held responsible for me not reporting at the indicated place. As I recall, a former teacher helped me to write a letter to the "Rauter office" explaining that this could not apply to my case. As no further correspondence occurred on the matter, I felt free, and in the favorable position not to have reported for the "Arbeitseinsatz" (forced labour). As I heard through the

"grapevine" that some Wageningen professors as a form of protest and rejecting the Nazi occupation would allow private oral exams to be taken by students no longer registered by the University, I booked four of the six exams assigned to the first part of the official Propaedeutic Exam. I remember very well (because of the later significance to me) the closing remarks made by prof. Prins after my (barely successful) physics exam. So he said "if you are interested and available, I will contact my colleague Edelman, who is in need of some more student help for his soil-mapping project in the "Bommelerwaard ". To me this was the best that could happen: it felt like having started on a defined beginning of a future career! | *having a purpose in the middle of chaos and it could be the start of a defined beginning of a future career!*

Coming home that day, a discussion with my parents indicated that they felt less assured about developments after finishing my physics exam. Without my registration with Wageningen University, I had nothing to show for recognized employment, so would be liable to be put into the "Arbeitseinsatz" in Germany. Aside from this, the newly established Nederlandse "Arbeidsdienst", as a mandatory pre-military service training for young males, opened its first camps by calling up unemployed youngsters from the 1925 generation (like myself). Anyone already engaged in a study at a regular institute for learning would be exempt from this mandatory service, until they had finished their program. The above formulation then led to a clever pathway for "non-loyal" University students to avoid forced entry into the "Arbeidsdienst" and /or Arbeitseinsatz in Germany, because as a pre-university high-school graduate they could claim a direct admission to the second grade of the Advanced Technical Schools (MTS).

Having heard through the grapevine about this opportunity I immediately went in person to Deventer in August 1943, where I could register for entering the 2nd year courses at the Advanced School for Colonial Agriculture (MKLS). In fact, the director of the school welcomed some four students from Wageningen University who all saw this as a way out of the threat of forced labor in Germany. They were an appreciated addition to the group of students composing the new class.

About three weeks after my entry at the MKLS, now as a student travelling daily in one hour with an Arnhem-Deventer "steam-train", a complication arose. I received a letter from Prof. Edelman, who had heard from colleague Prins that I would be willing to come to the Bommelerwaard (which is a floodplain agricultural area near to Zaltbommel) where I would be trained in soil mapping. What to do? My preference was clearly to go mapping as part of the University crowd. Luck was with me again: the empathizing director of the Deventer School told me that in view of the suggested benefit for a future graduate of the MKLS to have a thorough understanding about soils, he was willing to let me make a belated entry into the class, with the strict understanding that I would catch up with the missed lectures and would have to pass the term-exams (after Xmas). I was very grateful indeed for his decision on my request so soon after entry.

A few days later I boarded the train down South into the region of the big rivers Rijn, Waal and Maas. I checked in at the village-Hotel in Zaltbommel, where I was expected. When at the end of the afternoon the Edelman group returned from their fieldwork I realized that I did not know any of participants. All were obviously senior students at different levels in their previous study programs, and they correctly graded me as a freshman student-pupil, accepting me with a pleasant goodwill. In following weeks they took me along to different field locations, explained the soil types around, discussed how these had been formed, and properties for different use applications etc. I soon learned to handle the soil auger, in particular the type developed by Edelman. As expected, during the actual work, walking through the fields, making sample borings and making notes, many discussions arose about the cause of the lay-outs of the fields, former usage etc. Also local problems arising from inheritance of grounds were mentioned, things I knew very little about as a town-boy. Many details of my stay in the Bommelerwaard have escaped me in the course of time. However, the sight of the often foggy fall in the green landscape with above it all the squadrons of American 'flying fortresses' returning from bombing missions over Germany, following the big rivers and sometimes suddenly attacked by German Fighter planes is still in my mind. In fact I have a vivid memory of the crash of a delayed bomber plane with at least one parachuting crew member reaching ground somewhere as we watched from afar.

At the evening meals I followed discussions between participants, often including prof. Edelman, with great interest. It gave me a more mature picture of life at the university, especially the happenings after the entry of the Nazis a couple of years earlier. The occupation and the chaos were topics at the table. In total the

stay at the Bommelerwaard proved invaluable for me, and became later decisive for me in selecting my field of study. No wonder that I regretted very much the sudden rumour about an impending razzia towards the middle of November by the Nazi security forces looking for students that had gone underground. Edelman felt the weight of his responsibility in relation to the youngsters in his team and decided to stop the soil mapping project and advised the participants to leave and go into hiding..

Thus after some two months I returned to be a student at the MKLS, with again the daily train trip from Arnhem to Deventer, until Christmas 1943. Following the Term-exams thereafter, we had to prepare for our external practice period" belonging to the second year of study. In accordance with my request to be allowed to arrange this in the field of forestry, this led to a two months stay in Hoenderlo where I worked at the Kröller-Müller park (later our first National Park Hoge Veluwe). This arrangement turned out to be of great interest to me and it also provided later a then much needed foothold in Hoenderlo at the time of forced evacuation of the town of Arnhem, following the "battle of Arnhem" in September 1944. (cf part G below). The third trimester of the schoolyear '43/'44 covered my last part of study at the MKLS before the imminent ending of the war, we thought. Many schools in Holland were cutting short (in June ?) the last schoolterm that year, because of the turmoil following retiring German troops from the several Allied fronts formed in Africa and South Europe and eventually the D-day Front.

I returned to Arnhem, where I met again the companion-student that I had joined in the bus Arnhem to Wageningen in fall 1942. He told me that after the closing down of "Wageningen University" in Dec. 1942 he had gone to the Northern Province of Friesland, where later he joined the "Underground" movement. His team was eventually rolled up by the Nazi security forces and he had gone into hiding until his name became too well known in Friesland. He acquired a new ID card (Persoonsbewijs) with a new name, and had decided he would go back home in Arnhem, where he stayed with his parents and a younger brother. Talking about what we should do in Arnhem while waiting for the end of the war, I proposed we might perhaps attempt to make a soil map of the woods, heather fields, plus a few small farms. So we would be in the field, learn about the technique of soil mapping, and possibly would make a useful map for future developments of the town of Arnhem. Both of us became very enthusiastic about the plan, and we decided to prepare for such an undertaking. Indeed I managed to obtain "support" from the Edelman Lab, including the use of an appropriate soil. My companion took care of setting up camping requirements, and together we talked to a town official who after warming up to our plans, gave official permission to start mapping the grounds belonging to the city of Arnhem. In short, thus equipped we spent a number of very pleasant weeks in the woods at the Northeastern edge of Arnhem starting around the first of July. Admittedly the results of our efforts showed a bit naive approach, but hopefully it had served at least to give us some feeling about the difficulty to define the different visual characteristics to be used for distinguishing between soil profile types. About the middle of August my friend informed me that he had to quit our undertaking, because he had been asked by his former friends to come help with some business in the Underground. As he told me two weeks later in a hasty visit, the business concerned the collection of allied droppings of arms at night over the empty regions of the Veluwe. This was the last time I saw him, as he was caught by the Nazis and executed. The information about this was very shocking to me when it reached me after the end of the war some eight months later

The ending of the war looked imminent to us by the middle of September 1944. And there they came dropping out of the air, the British and Polish airborne division, on Sept. 17. Thus the Allied Operation Market Garden started in the heather fields midway between Wageningen and Arnhem. Much literature has been published about the following Battle of Arnhem. Some of you might know the book and film - A bridge too far - This was a huge military operation, that unfortunately failed!

The German Command back in position at Arnhem decided that the civilians had to "evacuate" Arnhem within days. Mind you, some eighty- thousand people of all ages had to walk away with whatever things they wanted and could take with them. As the river Rhine was likely to remain a front line over at least the coming winter, the same fate was given to the people of Wageningen. In short some 100,000 people of all ages walked or rode one of the few available horse-carts towards the North, attempting to find a place to lodge. In this respect our family with some neighbour friends decided to leave already after a week, with the hope to obtain lodging close by. The mentioned pension at Hoenderlo at which I had been living the spring before was indeed willing to accommodate us. Others from the Arnhem area left so late that they had to

move to villages some 50 km to the North, others had family ties with people living in Friesland and went there.

A considerable fraction of the population between Arnhem and Wageningen North of the river were forced to wait for the war's end away from their previous housing. This amounted to live in privately arranged shelter in mostly small villages for about eight months. The accommodation varied widely in type and duration, in cases in vacated chicken coops, but also in regular vacation facilities. As the winter of '44-45 was quite a cold one, and the evacuees had often been forced to leave without facilities to take along their belongings, discontent and also suffering was part of their fate. Nevertheless in retrospect it appears that fate was light in comparison to that of a considerable share of the Dutch living in the West provinces. There hunger and lack of heating in combination with disease and old age caused numerous victims. Turning back to the situation at Hoenderlo: broadly speaking this was relatively good, albeit that within days the population of Hoenderlo had increased with a factor three.

Total supply of potatoes and grain crops (particularly Rye !) was relatively high, and also fire wood was easily found. Thus one survived rather easily with the help of a central kitchen facility brought along from Arnhem. This facility was rebuilt next to the building of the grade school, that also took care of supplying night lodging for the passing crowd of famished people from W.Holland hoping to trade some of their valuables for foodstuff, at the small farm houses in the East side of the Netherlands.

Worth mentioning was the nightly upheaval of German V1 "drones" carrying their deadly load on the way from some-where East from us to Antwerp in Belgium. The drones were driven by a set of some 8 rockets on their wings, and the mechanism of firing the next rocket after the previous one had finished was subject to a mishap of not making contact. In that case the noise of the drone finished suddenly, and a second or so later the V1 exploded upon coming down with the formidable bang of a 1000 lbs bomb. So everybody followed the noise of the drone until it safely passed away.

And then, midday on April 17, 1945, after a rather quiet night, suddenly a lone (Canadian) soldier on a heavy motorcycle appeared at the roadblock right in front of the bakery shop where we had lived since our coming to Hoenderlo in September 1944. This was the East end of the village, and everyone had expected the liberation by the British army compound lodging and firing nightly rounds of heavy guns from Arnhem some 15 km to the South. So the local men of the Underground units had all convened at the roadblock on the highway from the South, providing me with the opportunity to talk to our first liberators. Before I could reach the lone motorcyclist, he turned around and went back. About half hour later a jeep (I had never seen one before) arrived, and from it a captain disembarked. He told me that we (the local population that joined the meeting) should "please remove the roadblock so we can pass through." He then said "any *gerries* around here??" I then told him that I knew about two German uniformed men. Next the Canadian officer said: "can we walk there?" and when I confirmed this he said "you walk with me". So we did and I remember vividly how I walked proudly at high pace with the first liberator I met to the school at the other end of the village (about a kilometer). He had taken a gun in his hand and when we reached the school he kicked in the door, to return a bit later with the two disguised German soldiers and handed them over to his followers with a truck carrying a handful of his own men. By then the Underground men had reached the school too and took over as the local bosses. Later on I was told that the Canadian officer I accompanied into Hoenderlo was captain Swinton of D-company, Seaforth Highlanders. That night a continuous series of war vehicles, including also the then famous Ducks passed through Hoenderlo to Otterlo. We were told later that there some heavy fighting took place with locked in SS-units of the Germans.

About a week later I had the opportunity to return to the empty (except for British army units) town of Arnhem. Then my "liberated life" took a start. Summarizing here my return to student life at Wageningen U. per January 1946, I mention only the points:

- 1) (my) return to Deventer per June first, after an early call for taking a crash-course at the MKLS to obtain the diploma "Planter" per ultimo December, meant to help start the recovery of plantations in the Netherlands India.
- 2) My subsequent entry per January 1946 into the second half of the Wageningen crash-course of September 1946, making use of my clandestine exams in 1943, in order to obtain the propaedeutic Diploma per June 1946

