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Tales from the Bulb Fields: My Salad Days with Swets

by **Arlene Moore Sievers** (Case Western Reserve University)

In January of 1981, coincidentally or perhaps not, when **Ronald Reagan** assumed the presidency, I also took up a new position with **Swets & Zeitlinger BV** in Lisse, the Netherlands. I came directly from a reference/serials position at the Nora Branch Library of the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, so it was a bit of a change. Swets & Zeitlinger, now Swets Blackwells, was then a major international subscription agency with some long held business in the United States that was growing, and not enough help who could write a decent business letter in English and could understand what these American librarians wanted. I was

hired to fill this need. I lived for four years in the village of Lisse where Swets is located. Living in Holland was a delight, and working in a Dutch office was an experience I recall fondly because of my

colorful colleagues and the *gezellig* atmosphere only the Dutch can create. (*Gezellig* is an untranslatable Dutch term meaning, vaguely, warm, cozy, comfortable and friendly.)

The bulbfields were literally outside the windows, a huge field of daffodils with a reconstructed medieval tower, right in the center, called Huis Dever. What a view in the Spring! But in the late summer, after the bulbs are harvested the next step is fertilization. Holland has a coastal temperate climate, rainy and windy, most of the year. You get about two weeks of hot summer. This generally coincided with the application of manure on the fields, windows wide open of course, no air conditioning in Dutch buildings...Ahh, the earthy aroma of the fields wafted through our offices. Also during this "torrid" season, sometimes the hot weather would be met by a company decreed *tropenrooster* tropical schedule - allowed for employees. This meant you could come in at about 7 and leave at 1 or 2. One time one of the distinguished elderly gentlemen who worked in the antiquarian division entered our office clad in his tropical attire, khaki Bermuda shorts and shirt - all he needed was a pith helmet!

The Dutch are extremely fond of their pets. It had occurred that another elderly gentlemen in the antiquarian department became a widower and subsequently he was accompanied each day to the office by his equally elderly bulldog, who of course could not stay home alone. This was in the days before email, and the telex was the mode of quick written communication. The dog ensconced himself underneath the telex machine and would apply his slobbery kisses to the legs of those using the machine.

Dutch office culture would make a fascinating anthropological study. The extremely capable and efficient office workers live on a steady diet of rich office gossip and equally rich coffee. I tried to estimate how much of the coffee I had drunk in my four years there and I believe it would fill an oil drum. The Dutch are a peaceable sort, but I do believe mayhem and insurrection would occur if they were denied their coffee. By the way the coffee itself, sugar, creamer, stirrers, pots, and other accoutrements were supplied by the company. The preparation of one's *kopje koffie* is a ritual in itself; the pouring, application of cream and sugar and the stirring

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me: "I don't suppose you've ever heard of Elsevier?" Response: "I know you publish under the imprint of Elsevier, North Holland and Excerpta Medica." After all, I had been buying and selling his books for nine years.

In 1976, journal publishing was still an industry sleeper. Almost all publishers focused first (or only) on books.

The debate on the new copyright act that year drew me into copyright matters. Little did I suspect that debates would still be going on 24 years later, with no end in sight.

The reaction of the Elsevier finance director to my first ordering of a PC for the office (an Apple IIE in 1983): "It's a toy. You have no reason to have one." (Got it anyway.) At this same time, our London office was buying "automated typewriters" to circumvent the same anti-computer bias.

On making my first trip to Amsterdam (1976), my Dutch boss fabricated a reason for me to go to Paris as well, as he just thought I had to experience the city.

On that same trip, I went from office to office in Amsterdam and saw a book with the word "Engels" on the spine on most bookshelves. I thought: "What kind of Communist company have I joined?" Took about five offices to realize it was an English-Dutch dictionary.

In that context, one of my favorite stories relates to the early 1980s when we were hiring a new publisher for the company we then had in Mexico City. The person hired, a Colombian native but American educated McGraw-Hill publisher, told later how he was asked by one of the Dutch interviewing him if he would learn to speak Dutch. His reply: "It's rather like learning to wiggle your ears. Highly entertaining, but totally useless." I have been fortunate to manage for 24 years with Elsevier on English only, courtesy of my colleagues' facility in English and tolerance for those who have few language skills.

We started the first work on the **Adonis** project (electronic full text of biomedical journals) in late 1978, looking for ways to make technology improve efficiency. The first business plan, around 1980, ran aground because workstations for the large optical disks cost \$40,000. **The British Library**, the largest potential customer, could certainly beat that cost with its "rubber heels and rubber wheels" system of people pulling issues from the stacks.

The most poignant comment I think I've heard in my career was said by a friend (an **ARL** director) sometime in the late 1990's: "I didn't expect to spend my whole career downsizing collections."

Greatest challenges: the educational process in the late 1980's when librarians had to have a crash course on foreign cur-

rency realities, and today's constant battle to get the message out about the "new Elsevier" among those who can only obsess on the "old Elsevier." We've been called the Evil Empire so many times that we need a theme song.

Greatest satisfactions: First, the **TULIP** experiment (1991-1995), that brought me in contact with librarians that I still count as friends. We all learned a lot about networked delivery of full text, which is what experiments are all about. Second, writing a booklet on some of the history of the part of Manhattan to which Elsevier moved more than a decade ago. (Guess what I want to do when I eventually retire? Write more about urban history.)

Current library use

A vacation activity: mining library special collections around the country for original 1920s and 1930s band arrangements for my husband's band. Great fun and I appreciate and salute those libraries that preserve this part of American history.

My thanks to the **New York Public Library** just for being there. What a resource. Makes you a believer.

Finally, my dream: to get my own copy of many American newspapers and magazines from 1890-1930. I'm holding out for the day I can get them affordably on the Web. In my dreams? 🐷

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accompanied by the utterance "*Lekker koffie, hor!*" (translated approximately as Aaaaaaaah, good coffee!) is always required. And I must admit the coffee is really, really good. When I first got to Holland I would hear colleagues who traveled in North America speak with disgust about American coffee and how weak and undrinkable it was. I felt obliged to defend the honor of Maxwell House and Folgers, et al. However on my first business trip back to North America I remember my first cup of morning coffee in the Montreal Holiday Inn, and the first sip when I realized all their allegations were true!

Language was not an immediate problem since virtually all employees at Swets had to know some English to do their jobs. Everyone born post war in the Netherlands is pretty proficient in English and it is emphasized in the schools, but they really become proficient from imbibing imported American culture, primarily pop music and television.

A colleague called Ton, short for Anton, who taught me the ropes so to speak, proudly announced he had learned a lot of his English not only in the schools, but also through watching and listening to pirate broadcasts of shows such as *Mr. Ed* on television. He proceeded to sing me the familiar "A horse is a horse, of course, of course..."

As to the work itself, I was a quick study and was soon answering correspondence, dealing with claims, preparing invoices and dealing with claims, as well as learning what was at the time a pretty sophisticated computer database system. The Dutch office itself provided my first lessons in the language, *Nederlands*, or Dutch, and my early vocabulary was shaped by this experience as any child's is by his family. Two of the first words I learned were *schedeblade* and *pootaardappel*. *Schedeblade* is the name for an office supply item that is a thin cardboard divider used in the ring binders which are the backbone of the Dutch office filing system. There are no filing cabinets as we know them, but many large black ring binders shelved endlessly, with colorful labels applied to their spines indicating contents, such as correspondence, invoices, etc. and year. Each worker had a hole punch on his desk and used this and the ubiquitous *schedeblade* to maintain his files. *Pootaardappel*, by the way, means seed potato, a term learned because one of my customers was a large national agricultural library.

I went to evening classes to learn Dutch, and it was my aim to master it. I must say that Dutch is the most difficult language I ever tried to learn. And I majored in German, studied Russian, can read French and

Spanish, and have since studied Mandarin Chinese. Although I could do my job and live pretty well without knowing much Dutch, I strove to learn the language, mostly to understand the rich office gossip which was always divulged in the mother tongue! Living in a village, rather than a cosmopolitan city like Amsterdam, not hanging around Americans, but taking part in Dutch activities such as the local Jazz Club evenings, taking mini trips in Holland and the rest of Europe with Dutch people, as well as watching TV and reading one of the simpler daily newspapers and the royal gossip magazines, all contributed to what I regard as a reasonable mastery of the language.

Although most Dutch people know our language far better than the majority of Americans know any other language, there are some deficiencies. They have trouble for instance with Native American and Spanish language based American names, and spelling is often troubling. On learning before a business trip from the Dutch travel agent that rooms were not available at the Holiday Inn, but they had booked me in the Ramadan Inn, it took a few seconds for it to register as Ramada Inn. Once when some new invoice paper was printed and delivered to the office I discovered to my horror that in the payment instructions on the reverse side of each sheet was printed "Bank of Cananda." It isn't good business practice to misspell the name of the country with which one is doing business, so needless to say I didn't use this invoice paper.

Now back to those *schedeblade* and Dutch ring binder files. Perhaps the most poignant and lasting personal impression and perspective I was granted involved the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. This is a site I have visited every time I have returned to Holland, and to which I took all my American visitors. As one leaves the entrance and exhibition area, containing multiple editions of the diary in numerous languages, as well as the original plaid child's diary, and Shelley Winter's Oscar won for her portrayal of Mrs. Van Damm in the movie version and donated by her to the house museum, one enters the old office part leading upstairs to the hidden attic. That stairway and entrance was hidden successfully for years by a swingaway wooden bookcase filled with what – those Dutch ring binders with the same type of colored labels and *schedeblade* used in my Swets office.

The reality of what happened, that elusive, mercurial thing called empathy filled me as I suddenly, spontaneously felt the truth embodied by that house. The bravery of those who hid the Franks and others for those years, the fact that they were ordinary people just like me, but who risked their lives to save their souls became knowledge to me rather than history. I could see the soldiers tearing away the boards, flinging those files and taking people to their deaths. That mundane thing, a ring binder divided by thin pieces of cardboard called *schedeblade*, is now a touchstone for me to the past. 🌿

From Microcards to Digitization

by **Kathryn Luther Henderson** (Professor, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 501 E. Daniel St. Champaign, IL 61820; ph: 217-333-6191) <henderso@alexia.lis.uiuc.edu>

As a librarian/library school educator for over half of the 20th century, there are lots of memories to recall. I won't fill up your issue with all of them but pick out a few that are special to me from the perspective of my career as a serials librarian in a large university library; a circulation/serials/head cataloger in a theological library; and for the past 35 years as a faculty member of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS), **University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC)** teaching courses in cataloging and classification, technical services, and preservation.

My most vivid memory of any paper I wrote in library school in the late 40s concerned an idea that a prominent librarian had for the card catalog. Microcards would provide both access and text for users. Us-

ers could take from the catalog the tiny microcards which would replace books. Of course, we all know that the century never produced a microform reader to satisfy users and neither did it bring this idea to fruition! Technology has played such an important part in innovations and I think of the old idea when we become so absorbed in electronic access and full text retrieval. Technology influenced how an old idea of providing access and text took a new turn.

When I was a student, I was asked to be one of the student founders of Beta Phi Mu and served as the honor society's first secretary. I have remained active in Alpha Chapter throughout its existence and still serve as faculty liaison to the Chapter.

Along the way, my husband, **William T. Henderson**, became a librarian, too. We

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