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CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

## TICKET TO A 'NEW LIFE'

### Henny Crijns-Coenen

My name is Henny Crijns – born Hendrika Wilhelmina Gerda Janny Coenen, in Beekbergen on the 26 November 1947. My parents, both deceased, were Pieter Coenen, originally from Grevenbicht in Limburg; and Anna Jandina Coenen – Verveer, originally from Hellevoetsluis in Zuid Holland. I have two older sisters Magda Magcheltje Drazic (deceased) and Anna Aafje Colagiur (also deceased) - both born before the Second World War, and one older brother Gijsbertus Peter Coenen - born like myself after the war.

My father spent from 1942 to 1945 in the concentration camps of Buchenwald, Dora and Bergen Belsen, as a 'Political Prisoner'. He was captured by Nazi Occupation Forces in 1942, while working for the Resistance on the 'Escape Line'. My mother and two small children, were forced to travel from town to town in the Netherlands (because of my father's situation), in order to avoid persecution from the occupying forces.

My father, was finally liberated from the concentration camp on 15 April 1945. However, he never got over his craving for intrigue, adventure and danger; albeit that he almost died in Bergen Belsen.

He spent the first few years after the war trying very hard to get work in Europe and America as an undercover agent. My mother on the other hand, wanted only to be a whole family again and to bring up the children in a new, safe and stable environment.



**Figure 1**  
The Coenen Family: Father - Pieter, Anna, Gijsbertus, Magda and Mother - Anna. Henny is the young child in the centre. Photo: 1952 Rotterdam. Courtesy: Henny Crijns-Coenen.

There was, I was told, an article in a Dutch Newspaper which advertised this wonderful land of 'Australia'. My parents heard that Australia needed workers, and although my mother wanted to remain in Holland to be with her father – my father did not. After some coercing she agreed to resettlement in Australia - at least on a trial run. A new land, a new start and the family altogether as a whole.

Australia offered a start that was unavailable in the Netherlands at that time. My father had promised though, that if it did not work out after two years, then we would return to Holland. Also we would not be alone, as my mother's brother and family had already moved there earlier.

We migrated to Australia in 1953, coming out on the *MS Fairsea*. On arrival, my father was offered a job by the 'de Piers' family on their farming property in Wyalkatchem in the Eastern Wheatbelt of Western Australia. In this job he had to work from dawn until dusk. My sister Magda was also sent to work on the land, whereas my sister Annie became a cleaner in the 'big house', as it was known – the owner's house. My mother kept house and looked after my brother and myself, but she also did quite a bit of needlework for the 'big house'.

We were just beginning to make sense of our new environment when tragedy struck our family. My father took ill and we were forced to move to Perth - the capital city – to be near Royal Perth Hospital where father was being cared for. The years in concentration camps had taken their toll on his health.

Early 1955, when we had not yet been in Australia fully two years, he passed away at the age of 42 years, leaving behind a young wife, who spoke no English and did not work – plus two teenage daughters, a son and another daughter of lower primary school age.

Thankfully, my mother was not foreign to being alone and having to bring up children by herself – but this was in a strange land – albeit not at war! We children all learnt English very quickly and in turn taught our mother how to speak it. However, it was a tough and trying time for us all. Especially for mother, who had to make it all 'happen' on the money which the girls earned in junior wages as nurses plus her widow's pension, which she had eventually been able to secure, as well as doing some dressmaking for other migrants.

Mother never remarried. Despite all the trauma, when she passed away in 2003 at the age of 88 years, she was happy about our migration to Australia. She left behind a son and three daughters, two married to other Europeans and one (the author) married to a Limburger from Maastricht. She also had





**Figure 2**  
Jester Henny leading in carnival,  
26 September 2008  
Courtesy: Henny Crijns-Coenen.

eight grandchildren, fifteen great grandchildren and a great, great grandson on the way.

My husband Harry and I still maintain close ties to the Netherlands. We have regular contact with relatives and also those new friends we made on a return visit to the old country in 1999. We hope to make more trips, pension permitting!

I was educated in Australia and being very young on arrival, spoke only very basic Dutch language – childish talk really. Over a number of years now I have tried hard to relearn Dutch by way of a course at TAFE and private lessons with a friend. I understand the language very well, can read and write it, although it takes me some time. However, I continue to feel self-conscious about speaking it in public. I also have my husband's Limburger dialect to contend with!<sup>1</sup> Dutch dialects often being very different from *Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands*, (the country's official language) and thus very challenging to negotiate

Harry and I are both heavily involved in the Dutch Community in Western Australia. He was President of the Dutch Club 'Neerlandia' for five years. I continued to write articles for the club's 'Neerlandia Magazine'. I am also Secretary of the Dutch Carnivals Club 'The Sandgropers'.<sup>2</sup>

I made the 'Prinsen, Adjudant and Raad' hats for them each year, and I write and produce two newsletters – 'The Carnival Gazette' and the 'Sandgropers Social Newsletter'. The 'Gazette' had an international readership. Apart from being distributed to members, it also goes out to other Carnival Clubs in Australia, Limburg in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. The 'Social Newsletter' is only for local members. Occasionally I write articles in Dutch, however, my limitations in the Dutch language and the fact that we do have Australians in the club, means that I write predominantly in English. Besides, our children and grandchildren's first language is English and they should be able to read the magazines as well!

On 1 November 2003 I became Princess Carnival – *Princess Henny 1st* – The Carnivals Club 'The Sandgropers' for 2003-2004. Although my mother knew of the pending honour, she sadly passed away just a couple of weeks prior to my crowning. My father would have been very proud as well, for he was a true Limburger.

When possible, I listen to Radio Netherlands and we also have BVN connected at home, which my husband and I watch on a regular basis and the Perth 'Dutch Community Radio' 6EB 95.3FM, which is broadcast every Sunday between 2pm and 3.30pm. The reason I listen to the radio stations and watch BVN, is not just because I like it and I want to know what is going on in The Netherlands and other Dutch Communities around Australia, but also to keep that little bit of Dutch 'girl' in me. It helps me with the language and hopefully my grandchildren will learn and remember some of the Dutch poems and songs that I try to teach them. I love my Dutch heritage, and all my friends know this and also know that I am a 'crazy' Delfts Blauw collector.



**Figure 3**

Carnival Princess Henny 1st takes the throne for the Sandgropers Carnaval Club at the Dutch Club in Wembley WA on 1 November 2003

Courtesy: Henny Crijns-Coenen.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Mestreechs, the dialect of Dutch spoken in Maastricht. [http://www.expatica.com/nl/leisure/arts\\_culture/carnival-in-maastricht-36390\\_9205.html](http://www.expatica.com/nl/leisure/arts_culture/carnival-in-maastricht-36390_9205.html).
- 2 Carnival in the Netherlands is also called "Vastenavond" or "Vastelaovend", and is most celebrated in Catholic regions, mainly the southern provinces North Brabant and Limburg. Dutch Carnival is officially celebrated on the Sunday through Tuesday preceding Ash Wednesday. Although traditions vary from town to town, some common characteristics of Dutch Carnival include a parade, a "prince" plus cortège ("Council of 11"), a farmer's wedding (boerenbruiloft), and eating herring (haring happen) on Ash Wednesday. One variant of Dutch Carnival is known as the Rijnlandsche Carnival, which can be seen in the province of Limburg. The province's capital of Maastricht holds a street Carnival featuring elaborate costumes that resemble some South American and Venetian influences. Intentionally amateurish marching bands ('Zaate Hermeniekes' or 'Drunken Marching Bands') traditionally perform on the streets. The oldest-known Dutch Carnival festivities date from 1385 in 't-Hertogenbosch. They are depicted in several paintings by 15th-century painter Jheronimus Bosch. During the three days of the Carnival, 't-Hertogenbosch changes its name to "Oeteldonk", which means "Frog Hill." This name changing tradition is common in and around North Brabant. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnival>