

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Netherlands
July 16, 1957

Mr. W. S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Martien and Anneke are extremely attractive, forthright Dutch girls of twenty. Two years ago, they received scholarships from the American Field Service to spend a school year as seniors in American high schools, while living with American families. They still talk quite a bit about their adventure, and an American listening in can't help being interested in their impressions, even if he has to wince now and then at their complete honesty.

It is pure accident that I know Martien and Anneke, and haven't met any of the other Dutch youngsters who have gone to the United States with the A.F.S. since that remarkable organization started giving high school exchange scholarships back in 1947. Chances are that I'd hear very different stories from each of the twenty-eight Dutch students who have participated in the program this year.

Martien and Anneke have enough to say, however, and their stories cover a lot of cultural ground without ever going very deep into analysis. Martien is an affectionate, family-loving girl while Anneke is fiercely independent. In a way, it seems proper that Martien was sent south to spend her year in a small town in Virginia, and Anneke went north to live in a large town in Minnesota. Naturally, these facts of temperament and geography color the paraphrased interviews I've written below.

It should also be borne in mind that they come from fairly well-to-do Dutch families, for the A.F.S. does not as a rule pay travel expenses or give pocket money to its young students.

Anneke

The clouds were blackening up for a good thunderstorm when I met Anneke for our interview under the striped awning of a sidewalk cafe on the Buitenhof. I spied her sitting at one of the front tables and I wondered again how such firmness of opinion and purpose could be hidden behind her child's face. With straight white-blond hair and wide Delft-blue eyes, Anneke looks very young and almost too Dutch to be true. She showed her seriousness last week with the erudite lecture on Grotius she presented to our mixed American-English-Dutch group; now she was looking much less scholarly and slightly elated. I soon discovered that her excitement was due in part to the weather (she likes thunderstorms indiscriminately) and in part to the secretarial job she had found two days before with an import-export company.

"You see," she began, "it's a matter of forgetting everything I learned in business school and fitting in completely with the methods of my office. That is one benefit I gained from going to America in 1955; I learned how to forget my old position and adjust to my new one. Oh, the first day at the office was very bad. I had to do letters in Dutch, English, French and German. I made so many mistakes that I was very discouraged. When I told my mother that evening that I didn't think I could do the work, she laughed and said, 'Finally, after all these years! This is the first time I've ever heard anything like that from you.' Of course, I did much better the next day.

From her answers to my questions about A.F.S. and America, I gathered that Anneke was already quite competent in dealing with new situations two years ago.

"To be very frank," Anneke said, "I don't think they chose my American family very wisely. Why would they send me to a family that had two sons and no daughters? I have three sisters, and, well, my mother at least knows something about girls by now. But my American family treated me just like they would a boy.

"At first, I was very confused because my American father wouldn't tell me what to do. In Holland, when people do something wrong, they expect their families and friends to help them and criticize them. If I felt I was making a mistake, not adjusting well, I had to ask directly and then my American parents

would tell me what to do.

"There was another A.F.S. girl at our high school, a German girl who had lived five years in East Germany. She had a different type of family. At first, Ursula thought she was very lucky because her American family was so strict and told her everything she was to do and everything she was not to do. But after a few months, she noticed that the other girls in the high school had more freedom. After a while, she didn't like her American family so well.

"One thing about Ursula, she was very honest. She complained too much about her family, the school and the country, and I had to listen to all this. But she also admitted the bad things about herself. For instance, one day she told me that she knew she was conceited. Since I was her friend, I said, 'Yes, Ursula, you're an extremely conceited girl.' And she was. After a number of months she stopped complaining so much and told me how much she enjoyed the free American way of doing things. When the year ended and we had to leave, Ursula was the one who cried and didn't want to leave.

"Americans don't seem to be able to take criticism. I noticed that Americans will talk for a long time criticizing their own country, but if a foreigner says just one little thing against America, they get very upset. I thought at first that Americans were very chauvinistic. After all, if something is bad, what is wrong with someone saying it's bad?

"Our high school was in a rich district and some of the students had a lot of money. If the name of our school was mentioned downtown, people would say, 'snobs!' It was said to be a very difficult school, and I thought so at first. Later I found out that the school work was very, very easy compared to what we have in our Dutch schools. I took some courses that we don't have in Holland and liked them. Typing and Speech, for instance. We had one course in 'American Problems', which was very good in some ways. But I don't see how you can benefit from talking about problems you have no experience with. I'll give you an example. One of our 'American Problems' was Integration, and we had a Negro speaker. It was a very good discussion, but what good did it do when none of the students at our school had ever known any Negroes?

"Outside of class, the kids didn't seem very interested in 'American Problems'. The girls were only interested in boys. Sometimes they would talk about boys so long, saying the same

things over and over, that I'd get very bored. Then Ursula and I would go off by ourselves and have a good time discussing books, ideas or art. The other girls didn't want to talk about these things.

"At first, I had trouble understanding what people meant. I don't mean their English, but they were always complimenting me when they didn't seem to mean it. Someone told me I was a 'very sweet and pretty girl'. I was happy at first, then I asked myself if I really was 'sweet and pretty'. I talked to Ursula about this and we decided that Americans don't always mean what they say, that they're sometimes hypocritical. Some of it is 'kidding', of course.

"There were two groups in our class. I called them the 'elite' and the 'outsiders'. Fortunately, I was included in the elite. I think it was because only the elite girls had enough money to be able to entertain the foreign students. Even some of the elite boys and girls had jobs after school so they could buy clothes or parts for their cars. My young American brother--he was just fifteen--had a job at a service station, a Ford, and a steady girl friend who lived downtown. He was crazy about the car and worked on it all the time.

"I don't think the students were any more 'materialistic' than Dutch students in matters of money, but here's an example of what I call real materialism: I knew a girl who was going steady with a boy she obviously didn't like very well. I asked her why, and she told me it was because she didn't want to be left without a date on weekends. Heavens! I would rather stay alone in my room the rest of my life than go steady with a boy I didn't like. It struck me as not so much a lack of principle, as a lack of feeling.

"The most important thing to most of the girls was to be part of the mass. They dress the same and act the same. Anyone who is different is not liked. I like people who are different and have personalities. I noticed one girl who always said just what she thought in the classroom. She had interesting ideas, so I decided to become her friend. I found out that she was very unpopular, but I became her friend anyhow. Another girl was extremely religious. The American students are more religious than our Dutch students in general, but this girl made it something extreme. So I got to know her too. I was very surprised to find that in addition to being so religious, she went to parties and dances too. The other girls liked her quite well.

"It was difficult to get close to the American girls because of their cliques. If a group of girls were gossiping and Ursula and I joined them, they would stop. This made me very lonely at first, but I decided that I would just have to be patient.

"Part of the fault was mine. For example, there was the trouble about lipstick. When I went to America, I didn't wear any at all and thought it was not very nice. Finally, my American mother told me that I had better wear at least a little or I wouldn't be able to say that I was adjusting. So I bought some and put it on one day. What a difference! The American girls were very pleased and liked me better after that. I looked just like they did.

"You know, American clothes are very cheap and made of poor material. I couldn't waste my money on the dresses in the shops. Finally, I went downtown to the best store and bought two very expensive dresses made of material up to Dutch standards. The American girls don't seem to buy clothes that will wear well; they seem to be more interested in the style.

Anneke was just beginning to give out comments on rock-and-roll when the rain suddenly stopped and it was time for her to go back to the office. I succeeded in paying for her coffee (not always an easy victory here) and took one last shot at a question: "What was the most important thing you learned in America, Anneke?" She was already unlocking her bicycle as she answered, "I think it was how to adjust to the group." And off she went with a smile and a wave.

Martien

At twenty, Martien is undeniably a beauty: auburn-haired, elegant and fragile enough to give an initial appearance of helplessness. In actual fact, she is no more helpless than her friend Anneke, and at last week's picnic she surprised everyone by proving to be, of all things, a first-class baseball player.

Anomalies aside, she told a straight-forward story of the year she spent in a small Virginia town, where she first learned the baseball art. Where Anneke speaks with detachment

and analytical skill of her experiences up north, Martien tends to talk more about her successes and failures in family and social life.

Her attitude on integration and the Negro problem is typical and enlightening; she is a segregationist, firm but kindly. It is no accident that her American family held precisely the same viewpoint, and that the students at her all-white high school were uniformly against social contact between races. I'm tempted to think that independent-minded Anneke, in the same situation, would have upset family and friends by taking the opposite position. But not Martien.

"There were two beautiful schools for Negroes downtown," she explained, "and I know that the Negroes would not have been very happy if they had had to come to our school. I'm not against integration, but I do think that we must wait until the cultural level of the Negroes is equal to ours, and even then we can't force people to associate if they don't want to, can we? Why, the conditions in the Negro part of Washington were simply awful. Some of the Negroes live like...like...they live in such dirty houses and their cultural level is so low that I think it would be a big mistake to try to force integration now. I met some very nice, well-educated Negroes, and if they were all like that, it would be different.

"At first, I didn't understand the position of the Negroes very well. Once I sat in the wrong part of a bus, and another white girl had to tell me to change my seat. Another time, a Negro woman was getting off the bus with two cute children. I helped her and lifted one of the children down to the sidewalk. Heavens! The trouble that caused. One of my friends saw me do this and told my American mother. That night I received a long lecture about the mistake I'd made, but I really don't think what I did was wrong. So you see, I'm not prejudiced, but I do get angry when I hear about people like that Autherine Lucy trying to cause trouble in Alabama. Taking all those photographers with her to school! I wouldn't be surprised if she was bribed to do it.

Martien calmed down a bit as she started to describe the American families she had lived with. "My first family had come from Ohio to live in Virginia. They were nice people, but to tell the truth I wasn't very happy there because their family life was so different from our Dutch family life. I was like a paying guest. I even had to buy my own toothpaste. And my first American mother wouldn't tell me what to do, and if I made a mistake, no one would tell me. Once I thought I would help with

the housework by beating the small rugs. I took them out the side door and got them good and clean. At dinner that evening, my family kept hinting that someone had gotten dust all over the window sills and bushes at the side of the house, but they didn't come right out and say anything directly to me. After a while, I got tired of this and asked my mother what I had done wrong. Then she told me that I must always beat the rugs at the back of the house.

"The family had quite a lot of money, and my American sister--she was the only child--used to get a new wardrobe every summer. At first, I didn't have many clothes because I didn't know that Americans change their clothes every day. Of course, I realized later that you have to in that hot climate. But my sister had so many clothes, and every year she used to give away many perfectly good dresses and skirts to the Salvation Army. Once I joked with her and asked why she didn't give me some of her old clothes, since we were the same size. She seemed to be embarrassed and didn't say anything.

"One of the troubles was that my first family did not have much interest in cultural things. They looked at TV all the time and never missed the soap operas. My American sister used to like to listen to popular record programs on her radio, which was between our beds. The important thing for her was to listen to the Halo Shampoo record program every morning when she got up. One time, I had listened to the classical music station in the evening when she was out. My big mistake was that I forgot to turn the knob back when I went to bed. The next morning, my sister turned on Halo Shampoo and out came some wonderful classical music. She was very angry and told me never to use the radio again. She even moved it to the other side of her bed.

"Please don't think that I didn't like my first family. They were very kind people. But you have been asking me about 'problems of adjustment' and I was just giving examples.

"My second American family had originated from Alabama. They were wonderful people who loved to stay home and enjoy family life. There were always many guests, a lot of good food and plenty of bourbon in the house. If guests came in the afternoon, they might stay until nine and no one would be upset.

"My second mother told me just what to do, so I felt much more at home. She'd say, 'Martien, it's your turn to make the salad today, and this afternoon I want you to help me by

cleaning the library and living room'.

"They were very cultured people. They liked me to play the piano and even offered to pay for lessons. That was extremely kind of them, but of course I couldn't accept. And another thing, they only turned the TV on when there was an especially good program. Most of the time, the whole family would be together. I had two American brothers and one sister, and all four of us could talk to either mother or father at any time. They were never too busy to spend time with their children. Most of the time we did simple things...played cards, listened to music, or just read books in the same room. It was very friendly, just like my family here in Holland.

"Our high school included from the seventh to the twelfth grades. The work was difficult and I don't think the standards were lower than in our Dutch schools, though the stress was different. The thing I liked best about your schools is the practical aspect of the studies. Here in Holland, we may study biology for two years, then finally see an experiment. In America, we were cutting frogs open after six weeks. And in English class, we had to write compositions all the time, which was very practical I think. I also enjoyed the practical work in my Home Economics course where I was able to improve my cooking and sewing.

"In some ways, American students learn more than Dutch students. For example, in Holland we might take two hours of algebra a week for four or five years. In America we had it every day for a year. I think you learn more by the intensive method.

Martien repeated Anneke's comment that American students seem much more mature socially than their Dutch counterparts. A few additional questions, however, brought out some interesting complexities in her opinion.

"No, I guess American students are not any more mature than Dutch students in social poise, though they do have many more social activities. At my high school, the boys and girls didn't mix much. The girls were usually in one place, and the boys would be in a group someplace else. If you were even seen talking to a boy, everyone would start whispering that you were going steady. Here in Holland, nobody thinks anything of it if a boy and girl are seen together. Last week, one of the boys in my course wanted me to help with accounting, so I asked him to come over to my house in the evening. After we finished working

at ten, we went for a walk in the park. No one would dream of thinking that there was anything between us. In America, I think they would.

"American students are much freer in many things than European students. They can select their own courses at school, decide when to study, or when to go on a date. They can also pick out their own clothes. Here, a mother would never give her son money to go buy a sweater, because he might get a poor garment or the wrong color. In America, the boy gets his money and goes right out and buys a pink sweater with black triangles on it. It looks terrible and he's very proud of his choice.

"In some things, however, we are more free here. In Holland, I often go out for a walk by myself at night and no one is worried. I was very surprised to find that American girls shouldn't do that. One night it was very warm in Virginia, so I went out for a walk just before ten o'clock. I thought I would go down the highway and buy a Tasty Freeze before going to bed. Before I got to the ice cream stand, my American mother came along in the car and made me get in. She was very disturbed that I was out by myself. Afterwards she explained at great length why I shouldn't go out, so I didn't make that mistake again.

"It's amazing how much older American students look than European students. A funny thing happened one day at school. I was approached by a boy I'd often seen at school who wanted me to go to the Record Hop with him. I said certainly, I'd be very pleased to go with him. He looked at me again, and then asked me how old I was. I said, 'Almost nineteen'. He laughed and said, 'Whew! Can I take back that invitation? I'm almost thirteen.'

"By the end of the year, I became fairly popular, but in a nice way, you know. Some of the girls were popular but in a very bad way. I went to four formal dances, and one weekend the brother of one of my girl friends invited me to Annapolis for a dance. I wasn't very popular at the dance though; I think it was because the Annapolis boys thought a European girl would be too intellectual and serious. The next day we went to the Admiral's for tea. I didn't understand what an honor it is for a girl to go to Annapolis until I returned home and found an article in the local newspaper about my date. I also became a member of the girls sorority and was elected to the May Court, which was quite an honor for a new girl at school.

On this note of minor triumph, Martien concluded her commentary and excused herself.

What, in the long run, did Anneke and Martien bring back from the United States, along with their assorted memories, bobby sox, and skills on the dance floor or baseball diamond? For one thing, they can now speak fluent, slangy English, and they dress with far more style than the average Dutch woman. A more important quality they share is an unusual articulateness and independence of thought in group discussions; this characteristic was certainly developed and sharpened during the year they lived as American teen-agers. And when they speak out now about America, the sharpness of their criticisms can't obscure the fact that their overall judgements are well-informed, complex and very friendly.

Sincerely,



Boyd R. Compton

Note: The American Field Service was organized in 1914 as a volunteer ambulance corps by Americans living in Paris. It was reactivated in 1939, and eventually provided more than 2,000 ambulances for work during World War II. Stephan Galatti, former banker and broker, has been director of the A.F.S. since 1939. Under his leadership, the organization has steadily expanded its program of high school scholarships for foreign students. This year, 769 students from 32 countries will live in American homes and join senior classes in American high schools. During the summer months, the A.F.S. helps bring hundreds of American students to live with European families.