



Theo van Dissel

*from
Pigeon-crazy
to
Chamberlain*

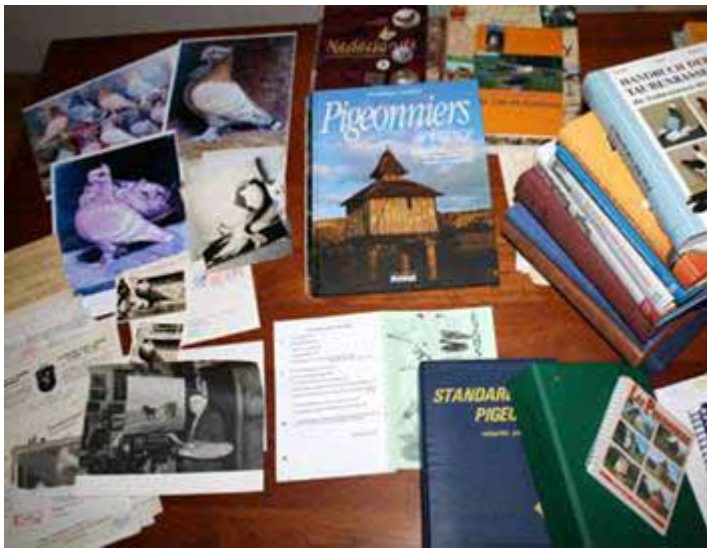
Text and photos: Nico van Benten

Theo van Dissel is an incredibly busy person, who follows the agenda of the two ministers of the Dutch Ministry of VROM, but who nevertheless found time for a relaxed conversation, on a winter evening in The Hague Pigeon Museum. In the world of pigeon fanciers Theo is known as a breeder of several pigeon breeds, in special the Bokhara Trumpeter. He was a board member of many Clubs and Associations and specialised in PR. But moreover he is a collector of pigeon books and everything that has to do with fancy pigeons, as a result of which he has many contacts internationally.

International contacts no longer come first at the moment, though. Several years ago, Theo lost his job as a manager at a large car dealer because of the dealer's bankruptcy. It sure isn't easy to find a new job when you are 56 years old, so he spent a whole year at home doing nice things, but he was very happy when he found this new chance to become the chamberlain of the two Ministers of VROM; a job that suits him to a T.

I witnessed Theo's ability during a discussion with a baroness - in the function of Trustee of the small estate of Wouw in The Hague - at the 'unveiling ceremony' of a restored dovecote there, where he - to my stupefaction - showed a natural talent in the association with nobility and higher trustees; a qualification that sure does come handy in his new job as a chamberlain.

In the above photo Theo looks a bit formal. He had just come in from his work at the ministry and looking like this he could as well be a doctor in his study. What you see is Theo, looking through some mail, because his day starts every morning at seven o'clock on the ministry and lasts frequently to very late. Well before this he can already be found in the pigeon lofts for daily cleaning; he believes that hygiene in the loft is of the highest importance. He always makes time for his pigeons, although feeding and watering is done each day by his wife Marijke. Here in this photo you see Theo in his The Hague Pigeon Museum. He always keeps an eye on that museum; if something interesting becomes available for his museum, he acts immediately.



Left: I brought several objects to show to him. He will always give his opinion, whether it concerns the painter Delin or an old French Pigeon tower.

Right: One of the Showcases with statues, coins and plaquettes.

When I asked him which objects in the museum are the most valuable to him, Theo answered that those were the things which he gets from a friend, giving them an extra dimension.



Left: Another showcase; among other things, a number of pigeon figurines of Marleen Brouwers. On the plaquette is engraved: The Pigeon as Art.



As an example he told me, that the Sunday before Han Voerman had called him and said that - after a visit to the National Show in Denmark - he brought along a book, which turned out to be an old book of Spruijt, translated in Danish. Theo already had the book in his collection, but in such a case he would keep the book donated by Han Voerman and the other book would go. To him, books with a memory are the dearest and he has a lot of such items. Pigeon

literature is precious, but fortunately many books are given to him as a present. This way he gradually arrived in the international circuit of collectors; that goes automatically. Thus each year Theo gets an invitation for the meeting of 'important people', coming from all over the world and all of a certain importance in the fancy pigeon hobby, among which first of all the collectors, authors and pigeon artists. They meet on Good Friday in Nuremberg (Germany) in the world famous Pigeon Museum of Karlheinz Sollfrank.

According to Theo, at best, there will be perhaps 50 collectors worldwide , but probably only 40 collectors that are really active and each have a couple of hundred pigeon books. There are however collectors who - like Theo - have a collection of over a thousand books. This group however will include at most 10 up to 15 people. The 'greatest' is undoubtedly Karlheinz Sollfrank from Nuremberg (Germany), who - according to Theo, really has everything that you can think of in this realm.



Right: A The Hague Til (a thief pouter loft), copied on scale, with cabin, outside aviary and two dark pens. Made by Wout van der Spek. There are two of such lofts in the museum; a brown one and a smaller grey one.



At this moment Theo is glad everything got a place and although he has no catalogue of his collection, he knows it all by heart. The real extent of the collection is given proof each time he is searching for something and the books come out of the cupboard.

Left and below: A splendid overview of one of the partitions of the museum.

The idea for starting a Pigeon Museum arose in the first place from purely practical reasons, simply because there was already so much material collected and it had to be categorised somewhere, with an additional idea that it had to be saved for future generations. As it happened, his neighbour, who is a merchandiser in old metal and also removes containers with discards, had to remove the complete interior of the restaurant from the musical



of Miss Saigon van Joop van den Ende Productions. A great opportunity for Theo. It contained splendid panels, castes, tables and chairs, all designed by Jan des Bouvrie and perfectly suitable for the idea of The Hague Pigeon Museum. In two weeks' time, with the help of an old friend, the package house/garage workshop under Theo's house was converted into pleasing surroundings, in which much of the pigeon nostalgia got a splendid place.



Left: The common tools of a book collector: a pair of gloves, a magnifier and a paper-knife.

Of course there is always work to do, as the collection is still growing. Theo also realizes, more and more, that this must be continued after his death and this applies especially to the valuable pieces that he has gathered with

Right: A palette, painted with a pigeon, presented to him by the Spanish pigeon painter Emilio Blasco when he visited his Pigeon Museum.

Thus it may not happen that all this would fall apart after his death, or would be sold, or even worse, it would be dumped, by heirs who do not know the value of it. He stressed that there already is an official document which has established the destination of his heritage. His successor is known and the continuation of his work is thus ensured, according to a well defined and secured plan.



Too much has already got lost in the past and Theo considers the preservation of our national cultural heritage in this area as the most important aim of his museum.

The only thing that still must be done is a proper inventory, but that is something that Theo will apply himself to after his retirement. Specifying the 'aim', this includes collecting everything in the field of Dutch Pigeon culture, such as the books of Spruijt and v/d Mark, the paintings of Van Gink and Lentink, the drawings of Jan de Jong, etc.



Left: Paintings made by Eimert v/d Leeden, Theo's friend in the fancy.

How things got started for Theo van Dissel

Theo grew up in the 'workers' quarter of the 'Old Town' of The Hague, where the thief pouter sport was enormously popular in those days. Pigeons took such a large part of daily life that it was a near thing or he was born in the pigeon loft. The true love for pigeons he got from his granddad, who had a table and a chair in his loft and didn't even come down to have dinner with the family. His father built him a small pigeon loft when he got his first couple of pigeons from granddad. Theo was 6 years old at the time.

Right: This is what the little pigeon loft for his thief pouters looked like, with two dark pens and a sliding-lid.

Looking back Theo stated that then he was already completely pigeon crazy and spent all his spare time with his grandpa in the pigeon cabin. Later, when his parents moved from upstairs to a ground-floor flat, they had a large loft in the garden and he started keeping several fancy pigeon breeds. In that time in The Hague there were dozens of pigeon shops, where you could buy all sorts of pigeons for the thief-pigeon sport. For



didn't fly away when you put them outside on the ground, but you could call them and they would fly back to the loft. By their parading and showing off, doing short flights while clapping their wings, they attracted the attention of other pigeons, which could be caught this way. That was the 'thief pouter sport'.

Left: A Thief-pouter, as you could buy them in one of the many pigeon shops that were everywhere in The Hague in the old days.

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aw a very beautiful black Holle Cropper cock, which even had a band. It was a beautiful bird and he could buy it for a few guilders. At that time Theo's interest for fancy pigeons and exhibiting started to arise and as it happened that weekend the Avicultura Show was hold in The Hague. When visiting that Show, Theo saw a black Holle Cropper with a band number (written on the judges' report) which was only one

number different from the pigeon he h
chosen Best of Show. He asked the bystanders if they knew who the owner of that pigeon was - because as a small boy he had no money to buy a catalogue. He learned that the owner of the winning bird was Mr. Remmerswaal; a renowned breeder and governing board member of Avicultura. Later he was introduced to Mr. Remmerswaal and told him about his pigeon that he had bought in a pigeon shop. According to Mr. Remmerswaal that bird was given to his little cousin, who had probably let it fly away, it got caught and this way ended up in that shop. Of course Theo was especially interested to know if he could buy a matching hen from Mr. Remmerswaal. That was possible and he was invited to come to his home that evening. A nice little black hen was offered for 25 guilders, however, for a child - and certainly in those times - this was an insuperably large amount. He went home and begged his father for some money, but they were in straitened circumstances and he only



could have a few guilders, with which he nevertheless made an attempt. Mr. Remmerswaal laughed, but because he saw that Theo was really serious, he got that hen pigeon. From that pair he bred splendid youngsters and Remmerswaal, when passing by on his bicycle, often stopped to look at the birds.

Unfortunately then destiny struck. Theo was about 12, it was in the early 60'es and because of the bad economy his parents had an enormous hiring debt, as a result of which the landlord threw the family Van Dissel out in the streets. They came to live in a very small flat where he couldn't keep pigeons. His uncle came and took all birds with him in a jute sack, but he also took the nice books of Spruijt, that he had scraped here and there. In short, everything disappeared and even today he knows that he cried many tears for that, but that was how things went.

Right: A Catalogue from the 1958 Avicultura Show, so 51 years ago. Theo was 9 years old then and already pigeon-crazy.



rijke 35 years ago, she had never heard of fancy pigeons. As it happened they were out for a Sunday afternoon drive when Theo heard on the radio that in Utrecht the exhibition Ornithophilia was kept, so they drove to Utrecht and Marijke saw fancy pigeons for the first time in her life. There Theo bought his Norwich Croppers and Marijke liked the birds from that first day. From that moment on, they shared the pigeon hobby together.



At the 40 years Jubilee of the Norwich Cropper Club, in 1980, he met the very well-known Norwich Cropper fancier Eimert van der Leeden, who was a gifted painter of pigeons. Sharing the love for pigeons and art, they became very close friends. He also became acquaintance with 2 other fanciers who lived near Eimert, Jan Zeeman, a Modena breeder and Freek Zwaan, who bred Bokhara Trumpeters. When Eimert passed away he spent more time with Freek Zwaan and then yielded to the Bokhara Trumpeters, which fascinated him and since then never left his loft.

Left: Theo in his loft, with the Bokhara Trumpeter, as usual sleeping at the floor.

The interest for books and paintings, in short for collecting all kinds of things that have something to do with pigeons, returned then in all intensity. Thursday evenings there was a book market and here he met an old book salesman, who said he could assist him with pigeon books.

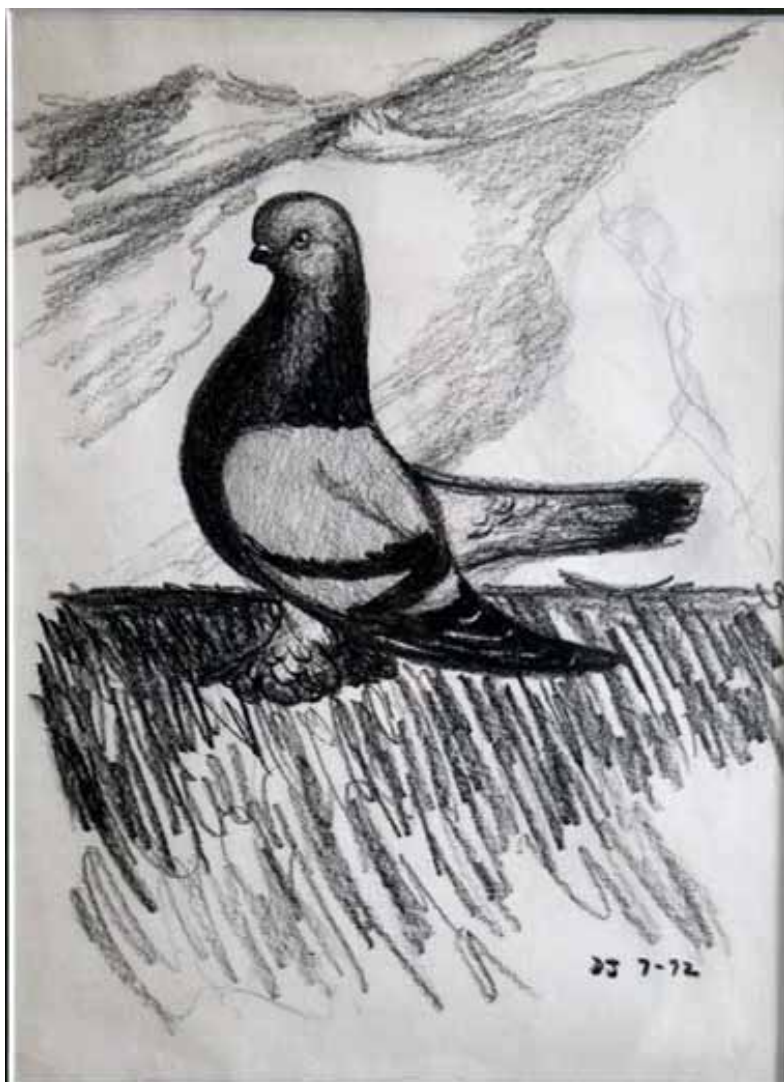
That became a complete book madness, resulting in having over 1200 books today. Moreover he has pictures, stamps, medals, certificates.... everything you can think of that has to do with pigeons. Theo calls himself an "all or nothing" character; he will not be satisfied with less, he collects everything.

In the nineties Theo organised a number of times a show for the International Bokhara Trumpeters' Club. To be exact two times in the Netherlands / The Hague and also in Germany he took part in the organisation twice. Later there was another show held in Germany, but because of the lack of time he missed it.

As a matter of fact that applies for all his administrative tasks within the hobby and also for the PR that he did on behalf of the associations. Theo is totally wrapped up in his work as a chamberlain for the ministers of VROM and for that it is - as he stated before - "all or nothing" and that turns out to be a whole lot!

Right: An older drawing by Diana Jacky from 1972, picturing a Berlin short beak tumbler.

In former days Theo was in several governing boards and also undertook a great many activities from those associations.



No wonder he was given the Honorary Membership of the Frillback Club and the Trumpeter Club. He was also board member of the EZHSV, the International Bokhara Trumpeter Club, did much work for the Royal Dutch Avicultura and for the PR Commission of the National Pigeon Union NBS; due to his merits for this, as well as for organising the 75th Jubilee of the NBS he received the Honorary Pin. He is still member of both the Dutch and English Breeders' Club of the English Croppers and the Dutch Breeders' Club of Wattle Pigeons and several foreign fancy pigeon clubs.

Left: A yellow barred English Pouter at Theo's.



Right: Morovia Bagdad cock, his latest asset, very rare, but to him that is extra attractive.

It was clear that we could go on talking for months about this museum, his experiences, his memories and all things that are stored here, and we will surely talk again in the years to come. In the meantime Theo had served a delicious Vin Rouge, but it was time to say good-bye. Before going we decided to have a look in the pigeon loft, where he still keeps a special and varied collection of fancy pigeons, such as his Bokhara Trumpeters, English Croppers, Lebanon Pigeons, Syrian Dewlap Pigeons, Beak crested German Trumpeter and his latest asset: the Morovia Bagdad.



Left: Morovia Bagdad hen.



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