

12. "Lie Down in the Ditch"

In the spring of 1968, I received an order from the East Germans to photograph the Royal Air Force headquarters in Zeist. Because I was born and raised there, I knew the way to the southern perimeter beside the castle in Zeist, as well as the municipal sports ground where Patria and Jonathan played football.

The start of Cow Street was well asphalted, but that was worse on the second little street to the left. At the end, the nearer I got to the farm of Van der Grift (his son Johan and I had been together at the primary school for boys of the Evangelical Brotherly Church). There, after about 300 meters, was the mansion, The Wulperhorst (a 'wulp' is a rather large bird that lives in swamps and on beaches). The original mansion dated back to 1772, but after a fierce fire, it was rebuilt and modernized in 1858 in the current style. Behind the house is a huge and very special garden, which stretches to the meandering old Curling Rhine. That is particularly due to water management. That is regulated via several ditches for both the discharge and supply of water from the Curving Rhine. That is why the garden is a somewhat swampy area with its own unique natural habitat. With a few other waterways and a group of trees, this was part of the landscape.

The house is on a 12.5-acre nature reserve and part of Stichtse Lustwarande, a chain of over a hundred grounds and estates. A colleague of the architect had the house built for his two sons, Gijs and Hank. Hank died in 1950, after which the Ministry of Defense bought the building for the Air Force Staff. Later, it was a detention center for asylum seekers. The Landscape Office of Utrecht acquired the estate in 1980, which allowed the house to deteriorate. In

2001, concert pianist Wibi Soerjadi bought it. He dreamed of a piano academy, and for that, he needed space and tranquility. Since the house was completely derelict, Soerjadi had to have it renovated from scratch.

Ebi wanted me to take pictures of it. "Photographing a military headquarters is prohibited, so be careful that you don't get caught." He obviously didn't know that in Western democracies, the outside of a building is not a secret, but rather the secrets that lie inside. "Make sure you take the photos from several angles because they will want different perspectives."

When I stood in front of the building, to the left and right were fields and meadows belonging to the farmer. On either side of De Wulperhorst stood the odd bush or tree. Standing there, I should be on military property and thus liable to prosecution. Due to a marshy jungle-like area, the rear was impenetrable, so I told Ebi I had no choice but to take the photos from the front. "Are there guards there?" he asked. I said there were.

"Could you hide behind a tree?" I had to laugh. "If three or four trees are standing next to each other, then yes. These trees are quite young and have little room to grow between the path and the ditch," I said.

Ebi's face relaxed. "O, there's a ditch? Then you have no choice but to lie down on the edge of the ditch and take pictures from there. The guard won't realize what you're doing," he said.

"I don't think that's a good idea. Doing that will make me conspicuous."

Ebi said, "Yes, but the guard should not see that you are taking a photo of the villa."

"You gave me the money for a good camera, so trust me to get you good photos."

"Just make sure the guards don't see you," Ebi said.

I decided that continuing the conversation was useless, so I agreed, figuring I'd manage in my own way. And that's what I eventually did.

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In the summer of 1968, during a lunch break and bathed in bright sunshine, I got on my bicycle with my camera around my neck and rode up to a series of mansions. They were once the reason why Zeist was called 'the pleasure garden for the rich'. I rode past five such estates to photograph before setting off to Wulperhorst. On arrival, I asked the guard if I was permitted to take a picture of the mansion from the road. I told him truthfully that I was taking photos of the mansions around Zeist for my collection. He permitted me, then retreated stiffly to a spot in front of his guardhouse. Naturally, I also photographed him and the guardhouse.

When they saw it, the Fathers couldn't stop laughing at the photo of Wulperhorst, the soldier standing in front, who was a fine example of the Dutch way of discipline, not to be confused with German or American discipline. Mr. Goodman slapped his thigh as he said, "What a beautiful photo!" And I'm sure he didn't mean the technical quality.

"With ideas like that, you're slowly turning into a real spy," Mr. Goodman said.

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At a certain point, I returned to East Berlin. Taking the shortest route, I handed the roll of film over on a

Saturday morning. Ebi and I went to the villa in the East we'd used before, and Heiner took the roll of film with him to the Ministry for State Security. Around midday, he returned with the photos. Without saying a word, he handed the pile of developed prints to Ebi. "Look what he did; he ignored all of our warnings."

Eberhard looked at the photograph lying on the top of the pile. His face went tight. "Was the guard able to see you?"

"Yes, we even spoke friendly. I asked the guard if I could take photos of De Wulperhorst."

"That means he saw your face and would recognize you again," Ebi said.

"Ebi, Heiner, you don't have the faintest idea how life works in the West. As a journalist, I work more effectively in the open. If I'd hit upon the crazy idea of hiding behind a tree-lined path in a castle moat, the guard would have immediately become suspicious," I said.

"You're saying that in the Netherlands you can simply take photographs of a military headquarters?" Ebi asked.

"Yes, I can, but you can't. I know what I can and can't say to a guard to get his permission. To get permission from a general, you need other arguments. As you can see, I took several photos of De Wulperhorst, and one of them was without the guard. From the technical point of view, it isn't such a great photo."

Heiner said, "Don't think you have to give us security lessons. We're specialists in that."

"Heiner, how often have you been in a Western European country since 1945?" I asked. "When I was

fourteen, I was writing for my father's newspaper. From that moment on, I learned that a journalist always asks questions. Most people feel honored and are more inclined to be helpful, as was the soldier when I asked to take a picture. People are vain. In almost every case, you get what you want provided, and you stick to what's feasible."

He and Ebi admitted they'd never been to Western Europe. "But we supervise several Western European agents. None of them has ever gone to the extremes you've gone to," Heiner said.

"Be cheeky enough and you can get whatever you want," I said, but this and other Dutch expressions went right over their heads.

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I had an amusing conversation with the Fathers when I reported to them about handing over the photos of De Wulperhorst. "Yes, we knew how they'd react," Mr. Goodman said.

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