

Sample translation from

Memoirs by Aletta H. Jacobs

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Translated by David McKay

The autobiography of the Netherlands' first woman physician and most renowned feminist

I

CHILDHOOD

Parents and children – My earliest years – How we were raised – My school days – I go to live with my mother – Adventurous plans – I am trained as a seamstress – New jobs – My first examination

When, in a family with seven children, the eighth little nipper sees the light of day, the event is not usually greeted with any great joy. Still less when the seventh is already four years old and the parents had therefore thought it safe to assume that the younger generation had reached its maximum. On the ninth of February 1854, I had the privilege—often dubious—of entering the world as an eighth child, in the home of the Sappemeer village doctor. Yet my arrival was greeted with gladness.

It was in the year 1840 that my newlywed parents, Abraham Jacobs and Anna de Jongh, then both around twenty-three years old, went to live in Kiel-Windeweer in the province of Groningen, where my father planned to practice medicine. Since his work was the only source of income for the otherwise penniless pair, my mother ran the household unassisted, at least in the early years of her marriage. And that was saying a great deal in those days, much more than now. She baked her own bread, made butter and cheese, laundered clothes, preserved fruit and vegetables, salted meat and made sausage, and spun, sewed, and darned everything the young household required.

Most of the time my father was out all day, because he called on most patients in the remote farmsteads where they lived, often hours away on foot. When he returned home in the evening, tired, my mother would usually help him mix his medicines, which in those days were delivered by the doctor, at least in the countryside. And each year, the Jacobs household witnessed the arrival of a brand-new world citizen.

After the third child, my parents understood that the growth of the village would not keep pace with the growth of their family. The practice there could not in the long run provide a decent living to the couple and their children, so they found a new home in Sappemeer.

In that large, wealthy community, my father practiced his profession until the year 1878, when a heart condition forced him to retire. From the old account books he left us, I know that in Sappemeer we had around 2,000 guilders a year to live on. Once or twice my father's income rose as high as 3,000, but there were also years when he could not make much more than 1,400. I admit that a guilder went much further in the mid-nineteenth century than it does today; I also acknowledge that life was cheaper in a village in Groningen than in the big city; but all the same, I can attest that in our household money was extremely tight. Yet our family grew and grew.

I had ten siblings, and almost all of us received a first-class education. Given the circumstances in the village where we lived, we had to go elsewhere for most of our schooling. I need hardly add that my father and mother's high educational standards often went hand in hand with serious financial difficulties. Again and again, they were advised to make provisions for their old age instead of pouring everything they had into their children's upbringing, but they always insisted that their form of investment would, in the end, yield the richest returns. "Acquiring knowledge and then applying it for the common good should be one's ultimate goal." Our father often dictated that line as a writing exercise.

Of my six brothers, the eldest followed in my father's footsteps, the second studied to become an apothecary, and the third, had he not died young, would have become a doctor of philosophy. The other three defied my parents' wishes and chose a military career. One of them decided to become an officer only after several years of architectural studies. Of the five girls, the eldest was briefly trained as a schoolteacher before marrying a doctor at the age of nineteen.

The second, Charlotte, was destined to become the first woman apothecary in the Netherlands. I studied medicine, and Frederique, my youngest sister, was the first woman in this country to take secondary examinations in mathematics and bookkeeping.

Diplomas in hand, she was very soon appointed as a teacher at the modern grammar school for girls in The Hague. Only one of the eleven, a girl, proved unsuited to any form of education. All attempts to equip her for the struggle for existence, even in the most rudimentary fashion, were doomed to failure; she was not so much unwilling as unable.

[p28] The School for Young Ladies became a nightmare for me. I felt I was becoming more stupid by the day, and after just two weeks I threw in the towel. Whatever they said at home, no one could persuade me to resume my lessons at that school.

This presented my parents with a difficult problem. What were they to do with me? After much deliberation, they decided that by day my mother would teach me how to run the household and by evening I would take lessons in the French and German languages. In those lessons, I showed all the diligence they could have hoped for. I soon had sufficient command of German to read it fluently. From then on I was never without a German book. My father had a large collection. Whenever I thought I was not being watched, I would plunge into the work of some classic German author. While I read, I would do my dusting, so I often broke things or left long streaks. My mother was appalled and quick to scold and reprimand me.

In those days, the adoration I had always felt for her was much diminished. She did not understand me; it did not occur to her that my indifference to housekeeping, my utter lack of ambition, must have some cause. And as for me, I was deeply, deeply unhappy at the prospect of leading the same sort of life as so many unmarried women in our village. Mornings spent housekeeping, afternoons peeping out the window over one's needlework, from three to four o'clock a promenade, and all this day after day for years on end. It was enough to drive a person mad, and I made a firm resolution to escape that future. But how?

Sitting in a dark corner of the attic, I would rack my brains for hours, wondering how to turn my life in a different direction. I thought of the merchant captains who lived in our village. A few of them were special friends of mine. If one of those shipmasters secretly took me along to America, then perhaps I could disguise myself as a boy and find a job as a coachman. I was not afraid of horses and had learned how to drive them years earlier. Once I had earned my fortune—after all, everyone earned a fortune in America—I could study at a university there. The plan seemed straightforward enough to me. The only hitch was that I was still so small, but with childish optimism, I reasoned that in the months ahead I might well have a growth spurt.

My imaginary adventures filled my thoughts more and more as time went on. They drew me in completely; I neglected my little friends and tried to avoid the company of others. Of course, my family noticed the change in me. Once a lively, rambunctious child, I had become quiet and solitary. My

father would shake his head in concern and urge my mother not to be too strict with me.

“What if we try letting her take lessons outside the house?” my mother said, at wits’ end. The idea was taken under consideration. She believed I had some talent for dressmaking. If I learned that occupation, I might eventually use it to earn a living. Father was persuaded, and I myself supported the plan straight away, believing anything would be better than the endless round of sweeping, dusting, and washing up. And after all, in a matter of weeks I’d be off to America and have no more to do with any of it.

[p110] How warmly I was welcomed to the conference by everyone familiar with my name. How surprised most of the women were to see that I was not nearly as old as they had thought. Susan B. Anthony, almost eighty by then, was the first to ask if I was really the same Aletta Jacobs whose medical studies she had read about in the newspapers some twenty years earlier. And when I had confirmed that I was, she made me tell her all about my studies, my practice, and my struggle for women’s suffrage. I hope to say a few more things about this conference in a later chapter. For now, I will limit myself to my own accomplishments in the suffrage campaign.

It was in the year 1883 that seven women, board members of the Dutch Free Women’s Movement, published an open invitation to a meeting aimed at establishing an association for women’s suffrage. Not long before, I had been through a difficult childbirth. The child I brought into this world was granted only one day here. I knew that because of that childbirth I would need an operation soon, but even as weak and downcast as I felt, I sent an immediate declaration of my support for the idea—and that was just the start. When I was invited to join the committee responsible for drawing up the bylaws and regulations, I understood I must not evade that duty. In those early days, I refused to accept a leading role. It was not until 1895 that I became the president of the Amsterdam division and not until 1902 that I was convinced to assume the leadership of the entire association.

Both jobs—running a division and presiding over the Association for Women’s Suffrage—came easily to me. It was not hard for me to write articles for newspapers and magazines about women’s suffrage, and I never minded sending petitions to the authorities or to influential people. But when I had no choice but to speak at a public meeting, it took all my willpower to conceal the shyness that gripped me. I gave my first speech about women’s suffrage soon after the association was founded, so it must have been in the winter of the year 1894/95. The Rotterdam division had

asked my husband to speak, and he had accepted the invitation at once. One day before the meeting was to take place, urgent business called him away to the north of the country. “I fear I won’t be able to make it to Rotterdam in time tomorrow,” he told me before he left.

“Shall I cancel by telegraph?” I asked.

My husband laughed. “Cancel? By no means. You can take my place.”

The idea did not appeal to me, but on the other hand, I understood that sooner or later I would have to overcome my anxiety. So why not take the bull by the horns? After some deliberation, I informed the board in Rotterdam that Mr C.V. Gerritsen would be unable to fulfil his engagement, but that I would take his place. Despite my shyness, the evening was a success, so much so that after the meeting a member of parliament approached me and said, “Dr Jacobs, your words have convinced me completely. From now on, I wish to be counted among the supporters of women’s suffrage.”

Later, too, my speeches repeatedly led to good results. Even so, I have always considered speaking engagements the most difficult and unpleasant part of my advocacy work. When giving lectures, I have often made the mistake of overestimating the audience’s general intellectual development. A case in point was the lecture series I gave in 1900 in connection with my Dutch adaptation of the book *Women and Economics* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In that book, Gilman attempts to show that many social evils are, in no small part, the result of married women’s economic dependence. In discussing her arguments, I ran up against such incomprehension and resistance that I decided to drop the subject from then on.

I also remember a lecture in which I tried to make it clear what a large role militarism plays in the dependent status of women. To think of all the protests set off by my words, all the hateful letters I received because of that lecture!

In 1903, as I mentioned, I became the head of the Association for Women’s Suffrage, and I went on leading that organization until the day women’s suffrage became a reality in the Netherlands.

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