

ENGAGEMENT DRESS MADE OUT OF AN DISCARDER PARCHUTE BECAME A 'GOLDMINE'

By Janny Herfst

On May 4th last year the KRO broadcasting system produced an TV programme called GOUDMIJN (Goldmine). In this programme three exceptional war stories were the main attraction point. In this programme special attention was drawn to the resistance combatant and secret service agent Jos Gemmeke (also called the Sphinx).

The occasion for this subject was the story about the engagement dress made by Bep de Kuyer from the discarded (and hidden) parachute of Jos Gemmeke, and which was given in loan by the Historical Association Nieuwkoop to the CRASH Air-war and Resistance Museum '40-'45, and which forms part of the exhibition there.

Many circumstances preceded the conception before this programme was ever released: Jos Gemmeke passed away on December 20th the year before last. You could read about that in our March issue of Contrails. I am a subscriber of the newspaper "Volkskrant" (People's Newspaper), and became quite indignant because of the very minimal attention was given by this paper to the passing away of an important Dutch war heroine. So I sent the editor an e-mail telling him that someone who had done so much for the freedom of The Netherlands, deserved much more than just a few sentences.

The editor who writes articles about well known and or important people agreed with me, actually Jos Gemmeke was already on his list for an article about her.

After a lot of e-mailing with this editor finally an article was conceived. Telling you how much effort and discussions were needed to have this editor of a quality newspaper finally write an article with the correct information,

I told him how the CRASH museum got to get a particular interest in the Mrs. Jos Mulder-Gemmeke and also the engagement gown/wedding dress was fabricated of the parachute by which Jos was dropped in Holland (in the vicinity Nieuwkoop village). The editor put that in his article, and in the article the name of Miss Bep de Kuijer was mentioned (the one who used the parachute for her engagement gown) On purpose I mentioned Ms de Kuijer's maiden name because at the time she unstitched the parachute, that was her name, and as I was not sure whether Mrs Tijsterman-de Kuijer liked to have her name printed in 'De Volkskrant'.

A short while later nothing surprised me more than that we were approached by the KRO for their Goudmijn programme. They succeeded to find Mrs. Tijsterman and got her to agree to telling her story in this programme which centers on true stories about objects or people. The

CRASH museum too was asked whether they were willing to cooperate in this programme and whether pictures of the dress could be made. Of course we agreed to that, and plans were made for a date. I was supposed to tell the story about Jos Gemmeke. Henk Verwey one of our staff members/researchers and particularly interested in this topic, and was responsible for the loan of the dress to the museum, was informed too. I was much dismayed a couple of days later when he told me that Mrs. Tijsterman suddenly passed away a few days earlier. You could read about this too in the previous Contrails.

Of course the plans for the TV broadcast were cancelled but I did speak with the editress about other possibilities to bring the story about Jos Gemmeke in the lime light another time.

By the end of March she contacted me again. They would like to make use of the dress for another broadcast. Mrs Tijsterman's children were going to tell the story about their mother, and it was meant to be an extra long story to be broadcast on May 4th, the day of the commemoration of the dead of WW II.

Again appointments were made for a recording day. The following days it became clear that children the story about the dropping of Jos Gemmeke, the parachute and the engagement dress would not comprehend, and they asked me to develop a plan B. I suggested to take the museum and the dress as a starting point but that was not what they had in mind. It had to be first hand stories so they suggested that the story should focus on my personal interests and I had to write down about my fascination. Things started to get quite and I insisted that to look for a story which would put Jos Gemmeke in the foreground. The less I would be in the picture the better. Using information which the museum has about secret service agents I could supply many tips about books about this subject ('Sphinx' by Eddy de Roever for instance), TV programmes and picture that were made way back.

April 12th at 8 am the TV team stood in front of the museum door. The interviews and recordings would take place there. Karin de Groot, who was to present the recording on TV strolled through the museum with me. Together with me Wilma and Herman Tijsterman posed with great respect in front of the show-case with the dress, and told the story about their mother. They made a so-called mirror-camera interview with me and both inside and out they made a lot of intermediate shots to support the programme. According to the camera operators everything came off perfect.

Then started the wait for the actual broadcasting date. I was quite nervous because after all these camera people seemed to have no inkling of what a parachute dropping on a cold night over a foreign country meant, and would they know? All in all it is quite an intrigate story so you are more or less at the mercy of the editor.

So what was televised on the actual date was a great relief to me. It looked wonderful and was put together with great regard parties involved, and especially the old recordings from the Polygoon motion picture news about the knighting of Jos Gemmeke made me sit on the tip of my chair (Jos Gemmeke was the only woman ever knighted with the 'Militaire Willems Orde' – MWO – which is the Dutch equivalent of the Victoria Cross).

The (TV) credits were still running when the first telephone call came in and the e-mail box ran over with reactions. They consisted of good compliments and praising reactions from the most unexpected corners.

The announcement of the broadcast meant much nationwide publicity on the Internet, in all kinds of magazines and newspapers even though that was not the intention of the broadcast at all.

Nevertheless the aim of our society and the museum were well highlighted.

That which I had in mind with the Goldmine programme was a complete success. Jos Gemmeke and her important contribution to the resistance against the Germans and the liberation of The Netherlands once again was brought to the attention of the Dutch people.

Also a tribute to the Goldmine editors. Thanks too to Harm van Harten who was my great help during the very long working hours at the museum on the recording day which enabled me to concentrate fully on the recording sessions.