

COOS HUIJSEN

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Coos (Jacobus) Huijsen (The Hague, 20 March 1939) is a Dutch historian, writer, former educator, former politician and gay activist. He was the first parliamentarian in the world to openly express his homosexuality.

In the post-World War II world in which he grew up, his only option was to camouflage his homosexuality or be doomed as an outcast. This choice dominated his personal life and his work in education and politics. It was a daily betrayal of himself, of those he associated with personally and of those who were in the same circumstances.

Early years

Coos Huijsen's life began under difficult circumstances. His parents divorced early and his toddler years were spent during the Second World War. His mother then lived with her parents in Goeree-Overflakkee, part of the Dutch 'Bible belt' and his father (watchmaker and goldsmith) was largely absent. As no homes were made available for single-parent families after the war and because his mother had to take up work where she should could find it, mother and son were forced into a more or less wandering existence for years. Between six and twelve years of age, he would attend eight different schools. Sometimes he lived with his mother, but more often with family (grandparents, uncle and aunt). As a result of his constant moving, he felt like an outsider and observer. This was reinforced by the fact that he became aware of his sexuality at an early stage and that it was different from others. Huijsen would later think, that in retrospect, he acquired a great deal of knowledge about human nature during this time.

When Coos was 13 years old, his mother ended her second marriage to a musician, a violinist for the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra and who he later discovered was also a psychiatric patient (often very aggressive). The divorce was quite painful for his mother which meant that his need to hide his homosexuality became even stronger. He was reluctant to tell his mother that after two failed marriages she would also have to learn that her son was homosexual.

During his student days - between the ages of 18 and 21 - when he realized what kind of life lay ahead of him, he became severely depressed, even suicidal. He ruled out seeking help as the chance would be too great that his mother would hear of his problems. Despite the distance from people that he maintained because of his

sexuality, Coos did have friends – one being a fellow student with whom he would later have a sexual relationship as well.

Social and political involvement

Following his teacher training, Huijsen decided to study history. After having been a teacher in Delft for several years, he became a history lecturer at the Christian Lyceum Overvoorde in The Hague. During his studies, however, he became a member of the student organization of a political party (CHU). The Christian Democrats' platform of solidarity and social cohesion appealed to him, but tolerance for gays was not advocated in any relevant political movement. There was only self-denial. Huijsen was also fascinated by modern literature (James Baldwin) and art films (Visconti) during this time because of the freer life that they depicted. This was in contrast to the patriarchal culture to which he had to adjust to daily. Later he would say that the spirit of the seventies had kissed him awake. Or rather, a gong sounded that made it clear to him that personal liberty had a legitimate claim in a democratic society and should therefore be a political issue. He realized that a cultural and social climate had developed that could be beneficial for women's and gay emancipation.

Soon after joining, Coos became chairman of the Christian Democratic student organization, the CHJO. His clear political outlook, communication skills and humor made him popular and the CHJO made a considerable mark under his leadership. Because he argued for political modernization, he became the exponent of the progressive wing of his party in the turbulent seventies. His party had also aged significantly which meant that the party leadership, despite his critical attitude, supported his efforts. This disturbed the extreme right wing, which sought opportunities to politically eliminate him. They resorted to suggestions that such a handsome young man, who was not yet married or engaged, must be gay. It became an aggressive and scandalous campaign. Yet in 1972 he was elected a parliamentarian.

Coming out

When, due to a cabinet crisis, he lost his seat and returned to education, he decided to come out of the closet to a small circle of people. He experienced this as an unprecedented liberation. In 1973 he met Lank, who was a physiotherapy student and more than 12 years younger. It was love at first sight for both of them. At that point, for Huijsen, it was unacceptable for anyone to deny the love they shared. However, much still had to be done. In his work as an educator at the time, he felt it was important for young people to come into contact with role models who were also gay. As a result, he came out of the closet at his school and Lank accompanied him to school parties, just like the partners of his heterosexual colleagues. However, in

politics, role models were also required. Here, too, it was a question of humanity – politicians just needed to be given the opportunity to discover that a gay person could be one of them and that gays and lesbians could articulate their own experiences in parliament. It was also the place where opinions were formed and power was exercised. This required risks to be taken. In March 1976, when he returned to being a parliamentarian, he felt the time was ripe for such a political step, and Huijsen officially came out of the closet. This was despite the real possibility that it would hurt his social standing and political career.

The coming out of Huijsen also meant that he broke with the Dutch Reformed Church in which the orthodox wing blocked emancipation. He joined Lank with the Remonstrants, a traditionally liberal group. This became the first church in the world to open marriage for partners of the same sex in 1986.

A new strategy in the emancipation struggle

Next to being the first parliamentarian in the world to openly express his homosexuality, Huijsen also influenced the direction of the gay movement during that time. In the Netherlands, a gay activist organization (COC) had already existed since 1946 and did excellent work for its members. However, Huijsen and a businessman Walter Kamp thought it was time for an additional approach, one that was more consciously 'establishment-oriented' and explicitly focused on equality. As a historian and politician, Huijsen had noticed how much the Dutch establishment was influenced by the spirit of the times. The establishment wished to be viewed as modern and one way to achieve this was to embrace emancipation. The women's and gay movement had to seize on this sentiment and the Stichting Vrije Relatierechten (Free Relation Rights Foundation) was established (1977-1981). A foundation was consciously chosen as the format as the members did not want to compete with the COC and they wanted to work with a limited group. Its message was that gay rights had to be recognized as human rights and gay emancipation would be treated as a political issue. Huijsen became chairman, Kamp the treasurer.

The Miami Nightmare

In the seventies, Kamp initiated a friendship between a number of gays from Amsterdam and New York. As a result of the mutual support between Amsterdam and New York, the Stichting Vrije Relatierechten (SVR) organised a large protest campaign at the Royal Concertgebouw in Amsterdam against the actions of the American singer and anti-gay activist Anita Bryant in 1977 called the 'Miami Nightmare'. The campaign released a page size advertisement against discrimination against homosexuals in *Time Magazine* with the names of prominent figures from all

over Europe. The 'Miami Nightmare' was a spectacular event, in which many popular artists performed, politicians declared their support for gay emancipation and prominent members of the gay community attended.

Walter Kamp guaranteed its success as it marked the first time that public opinion had been called upon by such a large-scale gay campaign, and all in the Royal Concertgebouw, the Walhalla of the cultural establishment. Huijsen was invited to travel to New York and give a press conference about the campaign at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The Dutch consul general attended. Also, at the request of the SVR, the Dutch foreign minister Van der Stoep had already recognized gay rights as human rights, making it the first country to do so.

Huijsen then received a phone call from the Greek film star and politician Melina Mercouri in the early spring of 1978. The request was whether the SVR, following the campaign in New York, would support an advertising campaign against the anti-gay legislation of the conservative Greek government Karamanlis. This too was taken on. However, as expected, the SVR ended after a few years. The goals of the organization had been realized – gay rights were finally seen as human rights and emancipation was on the political table. The individual members of the foundation would now continue as active members of the parties of their preference, but also together in gay groups within these parties.

Human rights: indivisible

Huijsen switched to the Social Democrats after 1977. A proposed campaign by friends to have him elected as a Member of the European Parliament did not appeal to him. At that time the institution hardly had any power. Moreover, he wanted to continue his work for gay emancipation. He co-founded and chaired the gay group in his new party. In addition to his work he became a board member of the Schorer Foundation (1978-1981), which provided societal support to gays and lesbians and was also chairman of the Amsterdam Municipal Working Group on Gay Emancipation (1985-1986). Next to this, Huijsen's philosophy was that human rights are indivisible, and thus spent a number of years in the 1980s on the anti-apartheid movement as chairman of the Defense and Aid Fund Netherlands (DAFN). The organization raised funds to combat racism in South Africa and was thus in support of Mandela.

For the greater part of the eighties and nineties Huijsen worked as Director of the Gerrit van der Veen College. His homosexuality was well known in the institute and he regularly advocated (to the College of School Leaders in Amsterdam) the importance of providing education on homosexuality to the pupils. In this way he was able to undermine the common defense that there were no gays and lesbians at their schools.

The cultural basis of democracy

Huijsen has never returned to active politics. His Social Democratic party was not entirely concerned about gay issues and, from the beginning of the eighties, he became increasingly interested in the cultural-historical context of democracy – initially focused on the left-wing. This meant that he joined the party-related philosophical organization, *A.G. der Woodbrookers*, of which he also became chairman. In 1982, his first book, *Nog is links niet verloren* (The left is still not lost) concerned the growing gap he identified between the progressive establishment and the left parties. He foresaw serious consequences of this trend and published *Socialisme als opdracht* (1986) and *De PvdA en het Von Münchhausen-syndroom* (1990). He also published on this topic in the magazine of the scientific bureau of the S & D party.

Later he delved more deeply into the meaning of shared stories for social cohesion in a democracy. This led to *De Oranjemythe. Een postmodern fenomeen* (The Orange Myth. A postmodern phenomenon) in 2001. In line with this he also wrote *De kroon op de republiek* (The crown on the republic) in 2005 on the occasion of the silver jubilee of Queen Beatrix. His doctoral dissertation in 2012, *Nederland en het verhaal van Oranje* (The Netherlands and the story of the House of Orange), dealt with the significance of the Dutch monarchy for the Dutch narrative. In addition, he wrote *Ernest Renan. Wat is een natie?* (Ernest Renan. What is a nation?) together with the young historian Geerten Waling in 2013 and *De geboortepapieren van Nederland* (The Birth papers of the Netherlands) in 2014.

Gay emancipation continued to interest Huijsen, however. He was concerned that, in spite of all the improved laws and regulations, there are still many disturbing symptoms of homophobia, including the increase of aggression on the street. As a result, he and husband Lank, together with friends, took the initiative to establish a fund (Het Blauwe Fonds) to support LGBT emancipation. The organisation collects inheritances, donations and legacies for projects in support of the LGBT community and Huijsen was chairman until 2017.

When the COC celebrated its 70th anniversary in 2016, King Willem-Alexander visited the anniversary association at the request of Huijsen. With this he became the first crowned head of state to visit a gay organization.

During his worldwide research into the history of LGBT emancipation, Prof. Dr. Andrew Reynolds inspired Coos to put the history of gay emancipation in the Netherlands, including his own story on paper. This led to Huijsen's book *Homo Politicus*. In Dr. Reynolds' own book, *The Children of Harvey Milk* (2018), an extensive

section is dedicated to the significance of Huijsen for gay emancipation under the title: BEING FIRST. The unknown soldier. In 2016, at the presentation of his book *Homo Politicus*, Mayor Van der Laan and the City of Amsterdam honoured Huijsen with the Frans Banninck Cocq Penning award for his social contributions. In 2017 he was appointed by the King as Knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau.