

THE BALDWIN LETTERS (part 4, end)

by Theo Somsen [227]

The clog-maker Jan Hendrik Somsen (1850-1929) and his wife Janna Hendrika Rauwerdink (1856-1943) emigrated with their 3 children to Baldwin, WI. in 1881. In 1918 a curious 23-year-old nephew, Johannes Theodorus Somsen (1894-1967), started writing letters to his uncle and aunt in Baldwin. We do not know what he wrote, for up to now these letters have been lost. But the letters from Baldwin have been saved. From these letters I have made a selection of the most interesting passages. After three parts this one is the fourth and last one for the time being. There are more letters and these might be used in the future when there is a suitable opportunity.

Janna's last letter

In Somsen Horizon 5 Janna's letter from 1930 came up for discussion. After that she wrote another six letters in the period between 1934 and 1941; certainly a result of the consolidated contacts with her nephew from Arnhem after his visit to Baldwin in 1934. But what a formidable achievement of a woman between 78 and 85!

Janna wrote her last letter during the Second World War on 13 November 1941.

The Netherlands were occupied by the Germans but the United States and Germany were not yet at war with each other. Therefore correspondence with the USA was still possible. To be sure, the German censor opened Janna's letter, which because of this did not arrive at her nephew's home until 2½ months later on 26 January 1942. In the meantime he had married.

Then she describes how she could buy the house at a very favourable price thanks to a tip her daughters gave her.

Somsen house in Baldwin, 1999

*you think that the house is so cheap
yes I know people who say it is dirt-cheap
...
it belonged to a woman who was short of money
the people did not know this
since the girl sew a lot they meet many people
a woman told them
and then it was bought immediately
...
I think it is the most beautiful place in Baldwin*

stamp German censor

Though the USA are not yet involved in the war, still they experience its negative economic effects. Janna ardently hopes that the USA will stay out of it.

*we have had a blessed harvest in everything
and everything is expensive butter is 40 a pound
and eggs number 1 38 cents a dozen..
a cow over a hundred dollars
that is always the case in wartime
I hope we may stay out
and pray for peace
that bloodshed may stop*

Janna also relates that she recently moved from the farm to a house close to the centre of Baldwin.

Janna Somsen- Rauwerdink [309] and her eldest daughter Harmina Hendrika (Minnie) Wernlund-Somsen [320] Baldwin, 9 August 1941

Janna was permitted to enjoy this most beautiful place of Baldwin another one and a half years. She died on 5 March 1943 so that the last lines of her letter were probably the last words she wrote in Dutch. The Dutch language, which she kept speaking all her life, even in Baldwin.

Janna Somsen-Rauwerdink, a woman who actually never lost herself:

an Aalten farmer's daughter from the hamlet of Lintelo.

...

*and the best wishes from the whole family
and the blessing of the Lord for body and soul*

your aunt J H Somsen

final passage letter 13-11-1941

The strata of our lives lie so closely together
that we will always meet
the future in the past,
not just like something that is over
and done with,
but which is always of current interest and alive.

Bernhard Schlink
from: De Voorlezer, p 175