

# A tale of two families in the Dutch East Indies

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ISBN-13:978-1514300152

ISBN-10:151430015X

Printed by Mijn Bestseller.nl 11-1-2016





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## 1. Neervoorts & Spoor, friends through thick and thin

The Spoor and the Neervoorts were close, both living and working in the Dutch East Indies. But their working lives were very different. André Spoor made his career with the Dutch colonial government. Bart Neervoort was in the commercial sector, constructing and dredging.

They met for the first time in the European club 'the Harmony' in Makassar on the island of Celebes. It was next to the secretariat of the Governor – André Spoor's headquarters. The club was all white of course, as all the Dutch clubs were which bore such harmonic names. It was the focus of the very bare social and cultural life that the Dutch citizens of Makassar were confronted with.



When the Spoors arrived in this small Dutch community in 1918, they asked around: “Any other Europeans here?”

“Yes, the doctor, the clergyman.... And then there is this guy who scrapes mud out of rivers.”

Indeed, Bart Neervoort was involved in the dredging of the harbor of Makassar. He worked for a Dutch contracting firm, VAM (Volker Aanneming Maatschappij). An Indië branch of this company was just being set up in Makassar by Jan Schuurman Volker.

### **Cousins**

The Spoors and Neervoorts immediately took a liking to each other. They ‘clicked’ as the Dutch saying goes. Curiously enough, it took some time before they realized that they had family connections. Their mothers on the maternal side were sisters.

Melie Neervoort’s mother was Sophia Wilhelmina van der Stijl. Her younger sister Anna Maria van der Stijl was the mother of Anna Spoor. Melie and Anna were cousins.

Sophia had married Frederik Conrad Hendrik Schlahmilch. Both had died at an early age. Their four daughters grew up in a Lutheran orphanage. On weekends the girls went two by two to aunts, one of whom was their mother’s sister Tante Anna.

Anna had married Bastiaan Dirk Poldervaart, and her daughter, also named Anna, knew Amelia, or Melie for short, from childhood. She must have looked up to her older cousin, but lost touch when Melie married Bart and followed him to Indië.

A few years later Anna herself married André Spoor and traveled with him to the Dutch archipelago. He was sent as a starting administrator to the very place where Bart and Melie had lived for some 3 years.



## Two sisters

Sophia Wilhelmina van der Stijl,  
1857-1901

married Frederik Coenraad Hendrik  
Schlahmilch, father of Amelia  
Schlahmilch who married Bart Th.  
Neervoort

Anna Maria van der Stijl,  
1863-1938

Married Dirk Bastiaan Poldervaart,  
father to Anna Poldervaart  
who married André S. L. Spoor

Both families lived in the cooler, higher village of Maros. The road couldn't take cars, so when they arrived, a donkey cart was the only transport to Makassar town. It was one of the tasks of the colonial administration and construction company to improve infrastructure. The construction and upkeep of the Maros-Makassar road was the fruit of collaboration between André and Bart. The road improvement was essential for business and administration. Both Bart and André did a great deal of travelling. Both families enjoyed outings in their, what we would now call, 'vintage' cars. These were adapted for the tropics, with special seats for the djongos, the boy whose task it was to chase cows (and locals Indonesians) from the road to allow the Dutch to pass. One can imagine the car hooting its way through the crowds.

The women too meant much to each other, supplying company and practical support. Melie, a sensible and compassionate young woman, was a great support to 20-year-old Annie. Without her the life of this newly-wed wife of a colonial administrator would have been lonely. On top of that, Anna contracted malaria and typhoid just after she arrived in Makassar. Due to the intense medication for these illnesses she was advised to avoid pregnancy for 5 years, not an easy task for a young couple far away from home. In the meantime Anna was invited to 'mother' the two Neervoort boys, Karel and Frits, and hug baby Bart, born in Makassar.



From left to right:

Anna & André Spoor; Melie Neervoort-Schlahmilch with baby Bart, little Karel Neervoort at the wheel, and Bart Th. Neervoort supervising him  
Makassar, Celebes 1922

When the Spoors arrived, the cool mountain village where the Europeans lived, away from the hot noisy harbor town Makassar, was accessible only by donkey cart. When they left, a good, well-kept motorway joined Makassar and the European quarters. This is an example of the ways in which Dutch colonial officials joined hands with Dutch companies to develop Indië, to their own and mutual benefit, if not for the indigenous population.

It also gives a preview of the way in which the Neervoorts and the Spoors supported each other in the difficult times ahead. It was a friendship that was to last through thick and thin.



After the Neervoorts had left for Bandoeng, little André was born. In André's baby book Anna comments on the perfect road that led from their home in Maros to Makassar, as she describes the rush to the military hospital, where her baby was born.

“And then at a speed of 70 kilometers to Makassar, made possible because father (André) had the road kept up beautifully, which wasn't too difficult because cousin Bart had done an excellent job constructing it.”

Anna Spoor in André's baby book, 1925



Stunning scenery in the province of Maros near Makassar.

After Celebes, both families moved to other islands. Spoor was transferred to Medan in Sumatra, and then to Pontianak in Borneo. The Neervoorts went to Bandoeng and Palembang. In spite of the tremendous distances, the Spoors and the Neervoorts saw as much of each other as possible. Whenever the Neervoorts sailed for Europe, they would stop over in Medan to stay with the Spoors. These visits included swimming and sailing in the volcanic Lake Toba and wonderful climbing expeditions up the volcanos of Brascati.



Annie Spoor (left) and  
Melie Neervoort

Hiking up a volcano from at Berastagi  
near Medan Sumatra



Melie/Zus - Andre -Vonnie - Annie - Melie -Bart/Broer



Gunung Sibayak near Berastagi, Medan Sumatra  
A favourite family hike  
for the Spoons and the Neervoorts



From left to right: Frits, Karel, Broer and Zus Neervoort

How different were the walks when on leave in The Hague, here in 1930

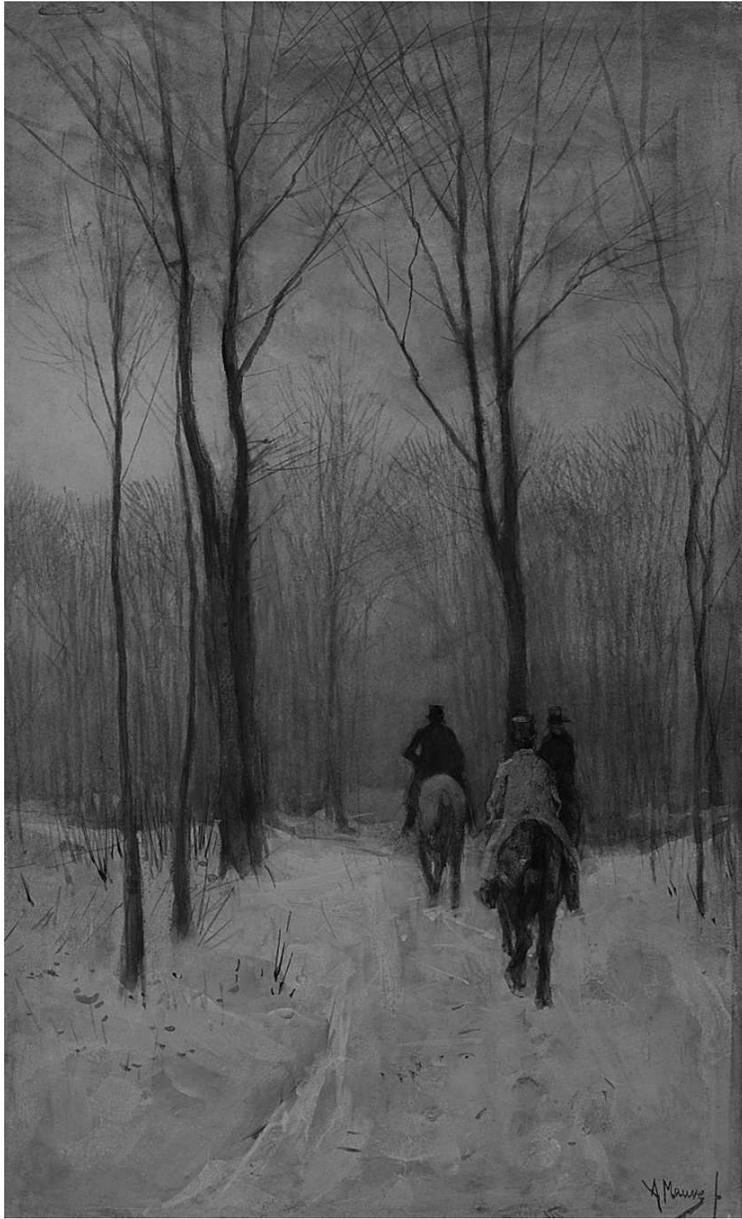
Sometimes the Spoors and Neervoorts managed to be on leave to Holland at the same time.

In 1930 Spoor would be following an update course in colonial management, while Neervoort was looking for opportunities to survive the economic crisis of the Great Depression.

These photos are taken in the Scheveningse Bosjes between The Hague and Scheveningen, an area to which both Spoors and Neervoorts would often return.

André, Annie, Vonnie Spoor





Anton Mauve, Riders in the snow in 'het Haagse bos', 1800

The friendship between the Spoor and the Neervoort families was also a practical one. The families helped each other cope with the peculiarities of the tropical country. When the Spoor family went to Borneo, there was no high or grammar school for the children. André had been sent to Holland for his education, but Annie couldn't bear sending both children so far away. So André's sister, Vonnie (Yvonne) went to stay with the Neervoorts in Bandoeng so she could go to the high school for girls (Meisjes Middelbare School, MMS). Vonnie became like a sister to Zus, whose older brothers, Karel and Frits, were also studying in Holland.

A few years later Annie, Vonnie, Melie and Zus were to experience the most difficult years of their life together, interned in the Tjihapit Japanese camp. (About that gruesome episode later on.)



All this explains why this history combines two families, the Spoor and the Neervoorts. In practice they acted like one family. This closeness culminated in the marriage between Andre Spoor and Melie Neervoort in 1960.



It is in 1960, in Hilversum, North Holland, that this family history ends. The Netherlands had managed to get on its feet economically, and entered an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity, in spite of the loss of Indië. The saying “Indië verloren, rampspoed geboren” (“losing the Dutch East Indies spelled disaster”) proved false. At the same time the last remnant of Indië, New Guinea, stumbled to its final act, leading to further deterioration of relations between Indonesia and the Netherlands. For the last time a Neervoort tries his luck in Indië, in New Guinea, this time as a civil servant. But as Karel’s family arrives, tension and confrontation between the Netherlands and Indonesia piles up. They leave in 1963 when this last island of the archipelago becomes part of the Indonesian Republic. But the family mood was positive. They had come through turbulent times practically unscathed.

Nearly half a century had passed since the first family member, Bart Theodoor Neervoort, set foot in Macassar in 1914. It was a historically turbulent period, in the Netherlands and Indië, both swept up in the tides of depression, war and decolonization. It is fascinating and encouraging to see how these two families managed to cope constructively with the chances and grave disappointments and dangers they faced. We find them forever in mutual support, staying in the right track (Spoor) and rising up out of despair as implied by the name

NEER VOORT (down, yet forward)

From our comfortable position in the peaceful, stable, and wealthy societies of Australia, the United States of America, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, we admire their perseverance, and mutual solidarity.



## 2. Neervoort & Schlahmilch - Orphans



### **Bart Theodoor Neervoort**

was born in The Hague in 1891, and named after his father, following a Dutch tradition of repeating family names. Born in 1857, his father was in the painting business, working for himself. Married in 1887, he died in 1898 at the age of 41, when his son was eight years old.



Bart's mother was Johanna Maria Neervoort-Lucas, a devout evangelical Christian. Here she is pictured in her best dress, with elaborate collar, in a studio reading a book, in the stiff pose characteristic for early photography (keep still, don't move), contrasted with the romantic misty moonlit background. Johanna Maria's life was anything but romantic. When her husband died she had to work as a cleaning lady, for there was no state support for widows. Even so she could not afford to bring up her four children. Being a devout Evangelical Lutheran, she managed to place the two eldest, Bart and his brother Cornelis in the Lutheran orphanage in The Hague, so that they could get a decent education. (An 'orphan' was defined as a child who lacked a father to provide for him.)

