Flexible but unbreakable

Johan Ringers, Father of Post-war Reconstruction

Biographer Tessel Pollmann rescues from oblivion the engineer who for six decades was one of the most influential people in the Netherlands

Sjaak Priester

(Will the new broom of the Water Management Directorate make a clean sweep…?)
When hydraulic engineer Johan Ringers received his honorary doctorate in Delft in 1930, he was only 43 years old – rather young for an honorary doctor. The first half of his career alone was enough to merit the distinction. Nonetheless, fifteen years later Dr Ir. J.A. Ringers (1885-1965), during and after the Second World War, was to become even more famous as the ‘Father of Post-War Reconstruction’. Sixty years ago, the life of Ringers is practically impossible to summarise in a few words. At an already advanced age he promised his wife that from then on he ‘would not accept more than eight or ten jobs’ at a time in order to find more time for his family. He was a workaholic long before the term had been coined. He needed a permanent army of assistants and secretaries to maintain his diary. And there was something else he was a pioneer of: networking. Anyone who was something became included in his ‘connections’. If Ringers didn’t know you, you didn’t matter.

**Rather dull**

Johan Ringers was born in Alkmaar, the son of a building engineer. He studied civil engineering in Delft from 1902 to 1906 and was thus on the spot when the Polytechnic School was given academic status and became the Institute of Technology. As in later life, he was diligent, serious, frugal, and in fact, rather dull. He didn’t care a bit for the ‘foul language’ and ‘drinking excesses’ of the student union. Immediately after graduating (with top marks) he went to work for the Directorate for Public Works and Water Management. As just a young engineer he was given the supervision of the complicated and what would today be called innovative construction of a set of locks near the town of Hansweert in the canal that runs through the island of Zuid-Beveland, at the time one of the busiest waterways in Europe. Considerably ahead of his time, he argued, albeit to no avail, for the simultaneous construction of a tide-driven electric power station.

Following an interruption of four years spent on Java as the supervising engineer and ultimately managing director of the Dutch East Indian Railway, he returned to the bosom of hydraulic engineering in Holland. He spent nine years working on the Northern Locks at IJmuiden, at the time the world’s largest shipping lock. He was to consider this project a high point in his life.

In fact his next job carried even more prestige. He became the managing director of the ‘Maatschappij tot Uitvoering van de Zuiderzeewerken’, the combination of contractors that drained the Wieringermeer lake and built the Afsluitdijk to separate the Zuiderzee from the sea, all in a matter of three years. These two projects put the Netherlands back on the map as a country of hydraulic engineers. And high time too, as Holland had lost its pioneering position early in the twentieth century. Initially, Ringers even had to travel to Germany every fortnight to get updated on the latest developments in the field. The Germans already knew how to use reinforced concrete, whereas the Dutch engineers still put their trust in wicker and rocks. The Germans also understood the benefits of scale model studies. Ringers introduced these methods in the Netherlands and so laid the foundation for the Hydraulic Laboratory. His combined work in 1930 gained the ‘bearer of ingenuity’ his Delft Honorary Doctorate in 1930. In the same year Ringers was appointed director-general of the Directorate for Public Works and Water Management.

**Delicate job**

On the eve of the Second World War Ringers was asked to revive the country’s neglected inundation defences to prepare against the possibility of a German invasion. It was an immense task, made delicate by the Dutch desire for neutrality. With the benefit of hindsight we know that it was also a pointless undertaking, since a twentieth century army was not going to be stopped by knee-high water. The German occupation put Ringers in a rather special position. Contrary to what we may think today the reconstruction of the country did not begin after the war, but began during the occupation – even within a week of the bombing raid on Rotterdam that brought the country to its knees. From as early as May 1940, with the consent of the occupying forces, plans were made and executed to rebuild Rotterdam and other badly hit towns, and repair the other ravages of war. The big man behind it all was Ringers, the ‘Government Commissioner for Reconstruction and the Building Industry’. In a sense he was the (unpaid) emissary of the...
Dutch government in exile, negotiating with the occupying power. Ringers was a powerful man; nothing, not even a hen-house, could be built without his permission. The strict control was necessary because of the lack of materials and means. The Germans, who during the first years of the occupation still harboured hopes of capturing the hearts and minds of the Dutch population, left this section of the authorities in peace. Collaborators were carefully excluded from the public service structure Ringers created about his person. As was found after the liberation, ‘a healthy Dutch heart beat within the organisation’. The Reconstruction organisation was later to evolve into the Ministry of Public Works and Waterways. Although Ringers was in a position that practically invited him to collaborate, he never fell for the temptation, as a parliamentary enquiry, stating the obvious, found after the war. He demonstrated his patriotism for example by publicly supporting the Jewish star engineer Josephus Jitta in a speech at TH Delft in March 1942. What’s more, he took an active part in the resistance, both in practice, for example by passing on reports about the port of Rotterdam to England, but especially in the National Committee, which was preparing for the interim role of ruling authority in the Netherlands until parliamentary democracy could be restored. Ringers was the intended ‘Temporary Commander’, whose task was to prevent the liberated country slipping into chaos. After all, he was ‘straightforward, a Dutchman through and through, not a plutocrat, not a politician’, which made him acceptable to all parties.

**Elite treatment**

In April 1943, as a result of the ‘Englandspiel’ (or England Game), the group was betrayed, and Ringers, together with 150 others, was imprisoned in the Oranjehotel in Scheveningen. He was later transported to the Vught, St.-Michielsgestel, and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. In each of these the prominent Dutchman received elite treatment, and the other prisoners often elected him their leader. As a fellow prisoner put it, ‘Ringers was made of material that could be bent, but would not break’. This lasted until two weeks before the end of the war, when the severely weakened Ringers got caught up in the Death March, the dreadful march back to Holland. The terrible hardship he suffered ensured that he would never be his old self again. According to Pollmann Ringers suffered from post-concentration camp syndrome after the war. In spite of this, he became Minister of Reconstruction and Public Works in the first post-war cabinet. His political career did not last long, as he had lost his knack of finding solutions in complicated conflict situations. After only two years he resigned over insurmountable differences of opinion regarding the Dutch policy on Indonesia. Although in many respects his was a progressive-liberal outlook, Ringers held rather old-fashioned beliefs on colonialism that did not fit in with the post-war era. He did not trust Sukarno, who after all had conspired with the Japanese, and he did not want to entrust the Dutch East Indies to such a man. As it turned out, Ringers’ resignation did not result in his complete withdrawal from public life. He remained involved in trade and industry in many ways, and as late as 1953 he sat on the Delta Committee to rebuild the Dutch sea defences. Over four hundred pages about a civil engineer most of whose work took place – albeit often to his chagrin - within the four walls of meeting rooms in The Hague, does not sound very exciting.
Responsibility

On 22 March, professors of TU Delft met to discuss the social responsibilities of scientists, with a special focus on Africa. I have yet to meet a colleague who did not consider the occasion a success. Anybody who has just finished reading W.F. Hermans’ Among Professors will wonder how this is possible in the year 2007. Nonetheless, it is. In the meantime, it might be interesting to find out why the theme merited such an animated discussion. Was it the discussion leader’s opening question: whether the group could find a definition of responsibility? Oh, the deafening silence! Apparently nobody had anticipated the question. And let’s face it, no definition was found. Perhaps that was the reason why the remainder of the discussion proceeded in such a lively fashion.

Taking responsibility includes being accountable. But to whom? To Africa? If Africa asks the questions, who is going to have the guts to answer? Everybody knows the figures. Twenty percent of the world’s population uses up eighty percent of the energy and raw materials. Millions of Africans have to live on a dollar a day or less. Thousands are dying from hunger. Generations are being wiped out as a result of aids. Witnesses of the way local agricultural projects are falling victim to decisions made by economic powers are left with little more than a feeling of impotence. These dilemmas have been written about time and time again. One could hardly expect that an afternoon session of Delft professors would produce unexpected results.

But then, if Africa leaves us mystified, who can wait for an answer? During the discussion one colleague said — if I remember rightly — that we build what we build for people. Building must be one of the oldest technologies known to mankind. Which is why the first building regulations date from around 2000 B.C. The code of Hammurabi lists the responsibilities of an engineer. If the collapse of a house were to result in the death of the principal, the builder should pay with his life. If the son of the principal were to be killed, it would cost the life of the builder’s son. Fifteen hundred years later the Jewish book of Deuteronomy specifies that the flat roof of a house must be fitted with a parapet. Should the lack of such a feature cause a person’s death, the builder would take on a blood-guilt. These ancient writings show us that people were allowed to aspire to greater prosperity and living comfort — stone-built houses rather than tents — but never at the expense of another person’s life. The simple rule was that prosperity must not be achieved at the expense of others. Dare we examine our own prosperity to determine which part of the cost we have left, knowingly or otherwise, for others to bear? Or do we consider our level of prosperity to be an inalienable right, and do we pay lip service to the idea that others should enjoy the same level of comfort while we are fully aware that our planet is utterly incapable of supporting the concept? Anybody willing to have Africa question our responsibility should not only be prepared to wish good fortune to the other party, but also to share it, so that our prosperity may actually benefit those in need. That way, taking our responsibility seriously will become a whole new challenge.

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