

The social engineer

A philanthropist with a double life. Jacques van Marken, founder of the Dutch Yeast and Methylated Spirits Factory and the Agnetapark in Delft, felt at one with his workers, and was the first businessman in the Netherlands to organise housing and pensions. TU Delft alumnus Jan van der Mast is working on his biography.



Jacques van Marken and his wife Agneta.

The Agnetapark in Delft is still thriving. A large, somewhat lopsided S-shaped lake is at the heart of the park, surrounded by lush green and streets populated with former worker's houses. Hiding in a flower bed are the busts of Agneta and Jacques van Marken, standing where their villa Rust Roest ('it's better to wear out than rust away') once stood. Even though he was an extraordinary engineer, Van Marken

is all but forgotten, tells Jan van der Mast during a walk through the park. Extraordinary, not only because he was the first chemical engineer to graduate from TU Delft, but also because he grew into a socially-conscious businessman who became the first to found a workers' colony in the Netherlands. An embodiment of both humanities and the sciences, combined with a romantic soul, he dreamed of becoming a poet.

Van Marken has a keen eye for suffering in the world. He's a member of the student club and sees workers living in squalid conditions. He becomes secretary of the debating club and hears Prof. Pekelharing speak with passion about social issues. Van Marken subsequently doubts whether he'll actually graduate. He wants to help to solve the social issues. His father, a clergyman in Amsterdam, is keen for him to become a model

businessman. Through his father's network, Jacques meets Minister P. P. van Bosse, who offers him this advice: 'Lad, if you really want to make a difference, you should produce baking yeast. Bakers are complaining about the lack of good yeast'. Van Marken subsequently makes two educational trips to the Austrian company Fleischmann. One of the happiest times of his life, notes Van der Mast in his book *Agneta*. But he is also taken aback by

under one roof, providing homes for four families. Van Marken commissions acclaimed Dutch landscape architect Louis Paul Zocher to design the park in the English Landscape style. It was to become a complete village with shops, schools, a recreation centre (now De Lindenhof event location), allotments, a playground, a skittle alley and space for various associations. 'Community life, that's what it was all

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the distrust the directors have of the workers. During the final two years of his study, he formulates a social engineer's 'responsibility'. He wants to increase worker happiness and ensure that they are in control of their own destiny.

Workers' colony

Two years after graduating, he marries Agneta Matthes and founds the *Nederlandse Gist- en Spiritusfabriek* in Delft. Starting out with 35 employees, he introduces a works council and pension scheme – the first businessman in the Netherlands to do so. Long before they were required by law, he also introduces reduced working hours and days off for his workers. In order to ensure their daily bread in the case of unexpected circumstances, he even arranges accident insurance and health insurance.

In 1882, Van Marken purchases four hectares of pasture land next to his factory. He asks Agneta to investigate workers' living conditions. She hands the results of her inquiries to Eugen Gugel, a renowned Architecture Professor in Delft. He designs a workers' colony, drawing inspiration from a *cité ouvrière* for workers in France. A total of 78 workers' houses are built on the land next to the factory. Four

about', says Van der Mast, reflecting on this first Dutch garden village. 'This community gave rise to about fifty associations, including a brass band that perform on the bandstand on Sunday mornings. The whole of Delft can come and listen'.

Back then, like-minded people from all over the world came to see the park. It's viewed as a welfare state in miniature, with 350 citizens. After editions in London and Paris, the third International Cooperative Congress is held at the Agnetapark. Subsequent to his visit, soap manufacturer William Lever establishes a similar, but larger, workers' colony in Liverpool.

Van Marken and Agneta move into the villa 'Rust Roest', to live amongst his workers. 'Not as their boss, but as their friend', explains Van der Mast. 'He didn't want any hierarchical relationships. 'I have nothing to hide from you''. Ironically, that's exactly what he did when it came to his childless wife. While, in 1886, Van Marken was at a health resort recovering from neuralgia and Agneta was running the factory, she opened a letter from a certain Maria Eringaard from Rotterdam in which she asks her 'Dear Jacques' what the delay is with her maintenance payment. The two women meet and it becomes clear that Van Marken

is indeed the father of Maria's three children. Van Marken meanwhile is slowly but surely becoming addicted to morphine. When Maria dies of TB three years later, Agneta offers his children a home.

Calvé

In addition to the Gistfabriek, Van Marken also founded the Netherlands Oil Factory, which later became Calvé. In 1891, another two companies follow: the Glue & Gelatine Factory and *Van Markens Drukkerij* (a printing house), where a partnership of twenty people published productions including workers' magazine *De Fabrieksode*. 'If they generated sufficient turnover, they would gain ownership of the printing business after twenty years. That was a revolutionary idea', says Van der Mast. 'It only took them ten years'. The crowning glory of the park is the Community Building, now home to an architect's agency and a house construction firm. 'During the day, it was a reading room and conference hall where lectures could be held, and in the evening, Sparta trained in the hall', explains Van der Mast. When the building is opened by Queen Regent Emma and Princess Wilhelmina in 1892, Van Marken gives an important speech about the conciliation of labour and capital.

Poor health forces Van Marken to stop work in 1905. He passes away on 8 January 1906. The brass band accompanies an enormous funeral procession. Van der Mast: 'Without him, Delft would have looked a lot different. Van Marken brought the city to life'. <<

Produced by the VARA Broadcasting Association, *De Strijd* (The Struggle) will be aired in October – a ten-part documentary series focusing on the workers' struggle. The second part of the series examines the edification of the workers, also covering Van Marken.