

Willem Sandberg – Portrait of an Artist – Chapter 6

ARTIST ORGANISATION AND RESISTANCE

It wasn't until 1932 that I stuck my head in the life of the Dutch artists organisation. I received a request at that time to become a member of VANK, the *Vereiniging voor Ambachts- en Nijverheidskunst* – the Association for Trade and Industry Art. I had never heard of the VANK, but I became a member. At a certain moment, I was even an active member and held administrative offices, including a seat in the Committee for non-permanent exhibitions in the Stedelijk Museum – for VANK members and others – and in the Exhibition Committee for the Dutch department at the World Exhibition in Paris.

The Chairman of the VANK was Jean-François van Royen, a master typographer and, as we always said, in his spare time secretary-general of the PTT. He was owner of the Cunera Press and that was his real work. This man had, between the two great wars, a positive influence on the whole artist community, the life of the artist association and the position of the artist. First, he had a lot of work to award via the Postal services: for designing postcards or stamps, fitting out post-offices, designing letter boxes and so on. But he extended his influence far beyond this. He had, together with his friend, the architect De Bie Leuvelink Tjeenk, a great influence on the artist association life in this country. Tjeenk was, at the time that I knew him, Chairman of the BNA, the *Bond voor Nederlandse Architecten* [Association for Dutch Architects]. The buildings he designed included the Jaarbeurs Building in Utrecht, that was pulled down about ten years ago – but his best work was perhaps the De Zwijger warehouse on the harbour of Amsterdam. He and Van Royen founded the Exhibition Board for Construction and Allied Arts. This included the architect associations BNA and *Architectura et Amicitiae*, plus the Circle of Sculptors, the VANK and perhaps something else. The Exhibition Board developed many initiatives and had a firm hand in all sorts of matters undertaken by the government. I remember that the Dutch entry for the World Exhibition in 1925 in Paris was mounted completely by the Board. And so too was the Dutch participation at the World Exhibition of 1937 in Paris. In 1925, Van

Royen was secretary-general of the Dutch department and in 1937, Tjeenk held that position. I was one of Tjeenk's close associates and experienced first hand what took place and how you put such a pavilion together. That was, naturally enough, not simple. You had all sorts of committees that interfered. I remember that one of those had, for some inexplicable reason, commissioned an artist to make a mosaic. It was an awful thing and I didn't want to exhibit it. But it was commissioned nonetheless. Well, I dropped it and it broke. I have always been rather radical. I forget the name, but that thing wasn't exhibited.

I'd like delve deeper into my association with the organisation of the Dutch entry, because that is the one and only time that I ever become a strike leader.

In 1937-38, preparations were under way for the Dutch Pavilion at the World Exhibition in New York in 1939. Mr. De Graeff, former governor-general of Indonesia, was appointed Commissioner and he had a friend. That was professor Slothouwer, who built the Grote Club near the Dam, but was largely recommended because he had made such a good job of the restoration of the Dom in Utrecht. De Graeff wanted to grant him the commission to build the Dutch Pavilion. Then we all said: *Hey, hold your horses, this is not how things are done in the Netherlands; in Indonesia, perhaps, but not here. We will have to take a careful look at whether we are really getting the best architect for such a Dutch calling card in New York.* And then we finally agreed that a multiple commission would be granted to seven architects. The names I remember are: Wijdeveld, Dudok, Van Ravesteyn and Stam. Others were of course involved, but I don't remember them anymore. The best design was the design by Mart Stam. It was, indeed, a fantastic pavilion, but it was never built. The commissioner-general put great store on granting the commission to the one that came in seventh – namely Slothouwer. It turned into a pretty heated meeting. In the meantime, De Graeff had appointed a number of former Indonesian civil servants to the committee and they listened to the former boss. So in the meeting, he gained the majority for Slothouwer. I stood up and left. Then, in the Board for Construction and Allied Arts, we deliberated on what we should do and we organised a strike among Dutch artists against this pavilion. The artists who had already received a commission were allowed to carry it out, but all the others were not allowed to accept any assignment for this pavilion. The strike was a

fantastic success. I believe there was only one blackleg. Later, during the war, it turned out he belonged to the NSB¹. Otherwise, everybody kept their word.

The Dutch Pavilion was really awful and the interior was little better. But the strike involved a whole lot of preparation and organisation. Chairman Van Royen was on holiday at the time. I was vice-chairman, so I had to lead the strike. That was very enjoyable, what with the press conferences and so on. The commissioner-general also gave press conferences with his side of the story. It caused a whole lot of work. I am very pleased that we were able for the very first time to test the solidarity of the Dutch artists. That must have been in 1938-1939. The exhibition was held in 1939. Very soon after that, the occupation took place, and other issues arose that were also about artist solidarity. Van Royen – who had an enormous talent for organisation and a special love for artists – had, in addition to the Exhibition Board for Construction and Allied Arts, also tried to involve the painters in one general organisation for Dutch artists, the Central Committee. And that, naturally enough, was difficult. There were a lot of associations for painters but he got them together in that organisation and went a long way by getting the painters together because of their profession and not because of the direction of their art. The associations were specially based on the various directions in painting. I believe that most of the meetings took place in Pulchri Studio. It was a nice organisation and there was a pleasant mood among the people who participated. I think there were around thirty representatives.

The Central Committee worked well until the invasion took place. Then Van Royen reached the conclusion that it was time to make a far more solid organisation of all Dutch artists. Actually against the Germans, but he couldn't say that out loud. That would be the Nederlandse Organisatie van Kunstenaars [the Dutch Organisation of Artists], the NOK. There was a lot of resistance to the NOK, including from me. The Germans were already threatening to set up a Culture Chamber here and we thought that, if we set up such an organisation, they would get their hands on everything in one go. So there were two sides: one to bring everything together in the spirit of resistance to the occupier and one not to

¹ The National Socialist Movement – the Dutch party that supported the Nazis during the war.

play into the Germans' hands with one organisation so that they could more easily set up their Culture Chamber. The majority of Dutch artists were opposed to it.

I remember that in December 1940, there was a meeting in Pulchri of those thirty representatives. At the time, people had just received a brochure through their letter-boxes from Hein van Essen. He was a dance critic and I believe his wife was a dancer. The brochure that he had written was all 'Blut und Boden'. It was a real Nazi brochure and it was sent to us by our own organisations. I got mine from VANK, in a VANK envelope. At the meeting, we protested virulently that we received such trash from our organisations. Van Royen tried to defend that by saying that he also had to let the other side have their say.

We were not at all happy about that and at a given moment in the debate I said that I felt more for the race of Christ than for Christians of the Race. Huib Luns, who was sitting next to me, patted me on the shoulder and said: *Chum, let's get out of here*. And so we stood up and left. That was the last meeting I attended of this organisation. It certainly caused a certain distancing between Van Royen and me, until a year later – the end of 1941 – he came to me and said: *I've come to the conclusion that it would be better to disband everything. I'm travelling around the country in order to disband all the organisations so as not to play into the hands of the Germans*. The Germans had set up the Culture Chamber in November 1941, and had made it obligatory for the artists who wanted to exhibit their work, for writers who wanted to publish something or for musicians who wanted to perform something in public and for the actors etcetera.

The whole action actually lumped all the artists who wanted to resist together and from that the artists' resistance was born. Then a document was handed to Seyss-Inquart² with – I believe – 2700 signatures protesting against the creation of the Culture Chamber. Seyss-Inquart then had anybody he thought was responsible for drawing up the document arrested. Jean-François van Royen was among them. He ended up in a concentration camp in Amersfoort, where he died in 1942.

² Arthus Seyss-Inquart was the Reichskommissar for the Occupied Netherlands. He was tried at Nuremberg for crimes against humanity and subsequently executed.

That was an enormous loss for Dutch artists and particularly for the unity of the artists.

After the Culture Chamber was inaugurated, many artists discovered that they had lost their livelihood. They were unable to handle any government commissions and could no longer perform. Then the artists' resistance, which had already been prepared, came into operation. This was already the case for the sculptors. The Dutch Circle of Sculptors then had around sixty members – and they had decided that, since their Jewish colleagues were no longer allowed to work on government commissions, they would not accept any either. They had organised themselves a year earlier. One of the organisers of the sculptors' resistance was Gerrit van der Veen, together with Frits van Hall. They also had a sort of support fund for the sculptors who got into difficulties by not accepting commissions. We then expanded that support fund because now, practically speaking, all artists were getting into difficulties. There was also a fund for the architects and visual artists and in addition, the writers also belonged to it. The actors also had one, and Hans van Meerten was largely responsible for that.

The visual artists and the writers were looked after by a group that included: Gerrit van der Veen, Willem Arondeus, Johann Brouwer, Koen Limperg and the architect Roosenburg was also involved for some time. I also remember meeting Antoon Coolen and Han Hoekstra in these circumstances. We met together each month and looked at what was needed. There was also somebody from The Hague who supplied money. How those people in The Hague got that money is something I don't know. But in any case, there was always money when we needed it. Each time we had discussions with the representative who supplied the money. For some time this was Leen van Dijk, who at the time was Tax Inspector in Leiden. Roel van Heusden was also involved. In this way we became a sort of club and that club was, in some way or another, involved in the resistance. I was, I believe, the only person from the museum world.

And this is how we became involved in distributing false identity papers. They were printed by Frans Cuwaer and there was a whole group involved who carried out other things. Mart Stam was also involved. The reason was the deportation of Jews, which was just getting under way. In the beginning, it was rather difficult to forge the watermark in the identity

papers. I remember Gerrit van der Veen trying to do this in the way you always make a watermark: by pouring the paper slurry onto a surface with a relief, so that you got thicker and thinner paper. But the paper itself didn't resemble in any way the original paper. It was absorbent, so you couldn't write on it. We simply didn't know how to do it. Later we tried cutting out the watermark – we had a whole team for this – but that wasn't satisfactory either. Until we – I think together – had the idea of making a plate in negative, which is in the paper when you look through it to see the watermark. The light parts in that plate were light and whatever was dark, so the whole background, was grey. We then printed the identity papers on double paper and on the inside of one of those papers came the pseudo watermark. I am still proud that the 'Anklageverfügung' for the attack on the municipal register stated that the identity cards 'von einem Spezialbeamten der Reichsrecherchezentrale in Den Haag nicht so ohne weiteres als Fälschung erkannt werden konnten'. In any case, it was the best piece of typography I ever worked on. At least we were able to help a lot of people with it. We were first able to provide Jews with different identity papers and later also people who sent to Germany to work, and for illegals. That was, in my opinion, very important.

Now there was a hole in this identity paper history. The forgery couldn't be detected, because it was done really well. But they could always verify them in the population registry. So the logical consequence was: the attack on the municipal register in Amsterdam. First, in the middle of March, a test was made but then the weather wasn't right and there was too much moon etc. Then the attack was carried out on 27 March 1943, with the known success. The German report about this is magnificent, particularly the beginning. It starts like a police novel. Later it becomes more business-like, especially when the punishment is being considered.

The leader of our enterprise was Willem Arondeus, painter, poet and also writer. He wrote a book about Matthijs Maris and about monumental art and the like. He was a – yes, how should I describe Tikkie – Tikkie was his illegal name. He was an exceptionally courageous man who was able to express his courage with a certain demonstrative 'grand seigneur' attitude. I won't say it was acting, I believe this was essentially his true nature. He was the

police captain and Gerrit van der Laan was the police lieutenant. There were several other people who were dressed as police constables. The rest of the story is known to us all or can be found in books. In any case, the whole thing went up in flames. The fire brigade lent a hand, by doing as little as possible to put out the fire. Only the Amsterdam police did their very best to find the perpetrators. The perpetrators were, I won't say betrayed, but in any case found. One of the people who participated and who was our courier was caught and – I do not know under what pressure – sang. Nobody can say whether, under exceptional circumstances, when tortured or so, he could keep his mouth shut – I would never blame anybody for that – but he did give up all the addresses and on the night of April 1, virtually the whole group was captured.

I was somewhat in charge of the organisation. I wanted to go along with the others, but they thought my face was too recognisable. My friends said: *No, you'll be caught. They don't know us, but your face is well known.* Often during the war years, I had to show police officers round the museum and was therefore perhaps less suited for the job. But I did collect the explosives in my home. The meetings were always at my house. Arondeus had the police uniforms made. I took care of the helmets, with some help from the designer Berkovich. I mention the names of living people as little as possible, but I want to involve those who died. Of those, there was a relatively large group who contributed. Some of them, such as Johan Brouwer, had borrowed a revolver and Koen Limpurg too, I think. He sheltered Arondeus and his courier after the attack. The majority of all these people were shot on 1 July 1943 after a mock trial. These included Koen Limperg, because he had sheltered people, and also Johan Brouwer, because he had borrowed that pistol or that revolver. I believe that twelve of our group were shot at that time.

About a year later, Gerrit van der Veen was also shot, together with, I think, Walter Brandligt and Frans Duwaer. Frans Duwaer had stated that he was prepared to print the identity documents on the condition that he would only have to deal with one person and that was me. I had to go into hiding immediately after the first of April. They came to my house, but they didn't find me, because I was in the vaults for the art treasures, in Zandvoort. I first visited Frans who was lying in the Diaconessen Hospital on Overtoom and

said: *Frans, I have to leave now. Do you mind if I put you in touch with Gerrit van der Veen?* And that is what happened and Gerrit became the liaison with Frans Duwaer. They worked closely together. I generally got together with Gerrit van der Veen and Frans Duwaer every month in Berg en Dal near Nijmegen to discuss things with them. Gerrit was taken prisoner in May 1944. Then Frans came on his own and said: *Wil, I'm so grateful that you put me in touch with Gerrit. It was the experience of my life.*

On the second day of April, the Germans visited Roëll in the museum and said: *Bitte einsteigen, we have to pick up Sandberg in the art vault. Come with us, you must show us the way.* I know that he almost wet his pants from fear that they would find me there. But I had already had a telephone call from my wife that they had been to my house and were coming to get me. I immediately went into hiding. When Roëll arrived at the vault, I had already fled. I had an address in Amsterdam where I could hide. I had my own room in Amsterdam, where I would occasionally disappear if I was in danger. But I didn't really want to go there, particularly with that face of mine. I then went into hiding with Van Gogh, whom I did not know.

We had the large V.W. van Gogh collection in the museum, but it was one of those typical peculiarities of Roëll that he kept all collectors and important people to himself. That was his domain and nobody was allowed entry. We had the whole Van Gogh collection hanging in the museum and Van Gogh and his wife at the time – his first – would regularly visit, but I was not allowed to meet them. Now I had heard via Berkovich – who knew Van Gogh – that Nel (the wife of Vincent William) had previously said: *Gosh, Sandberg could come and stay with us.* I had taken note of that. And so I went to Van Gogh's office on the Herengracht and said: *Could I stay with you for a little while?* He said: *Yes, of course.* Then I got on my bike and rode to the Gooi. Jan Romein was also in hiding there in Huizen, and he said: *What on earth are you doing, riding around with that white shock of hair of yours? Everybody recognises you!* I said: *Yes, but I haven't got a hat. I can't find a hat in my size anywhere. I've got size 53 and they don't usually sell them in that size.* But his hat fitted me and I then spent my time in hiding wearing his green hat. I made a neat business-man's crease in it. Romein had a long pointed head, but its circumference was the same as mine. I also wore a pair of

golden spectacles, with plain glass in them. That is how I hid – and it worked. I was hardly recognised there, not at all really. But since people could easily recognise me by the way I walked, I always stayed seated on my bicycle. I spent the time mainly in Limburg and Brabant, and the last nine months in the Betuwe.

The most important work that we did in the war was the preparations for the post-war Artists Organisation. We started on it in 1941. We set up a committee, together with Reinink, who had already left the department of Education, Art and Work³. Each of the arts was represented by one person. Jo Voskuyl was the representative for the painters. At a given moment, he went into hiding with Bart van der Leek. The sculptors had Frits van Hall, the architects Wegerif, the writers Jan Engelman and the musicians Bertus van Lier. There were other people on the committee, including myself. Reinink was the chairman of the group and his assistant was Jan van Gelder, who later became a professor in Utrecht. I may have forgotten a name. We met regularly and we reached the conclusion that we should set up a federation of professional associations of artists and that a Council for the Arts should be formed as a link between the federation and the government. That whole plan was at, I think, the beginning of 1943 already in the form in which it now continues.

I always discussed all these things with Gerrit van der Veer, but he was very annoyed at me for not having asked him to take a seat on this committee but had asked his good friend Frits van Hall instead. I don't know if that was the reason, but soon afterwards he set up a new committee. That committee had two representatives for each type of art, just like Noah's ark, although they weren't all male and female. This committee was under the chairmanship of Jaap Bot. I was also a member of this committee and something of a liaison between the two committees. I could therefore make sure that the plans were developed somewhat in parallel to each other. In the second committee – the one with two people for each type of art – nobody knew of the existence of the first committee, with the exception of Gerrit van der Veen. The reverse was not true – the first committee knew of the existence of the second committee. The two committees finally found each other in, I think, December 1944 and this formed the basis of the Federation, which came into being in May 1945. I

think it took until 1948 before the Council for the Arts was organised. In this way, the principles of both committees were followed. I wouldn't stick my neck out for the way they were put into practice, but that's a matter for the history books. This was one of the issues I had with the Dutch art organisation. I had, among other things, completely worked out that plan of the first committee, so that everybody had it down in black and white if I were forced to go into hiding. Some people on the committee were very annoyed when they heard that I was also active in the artists resistance and thus brought their work into danger. They thought that because I had come under scrutiny in the artists resistance, they would also be in danger. Nothing like that ever occurred, but I remember that they were very upset about it.

Gerrit van der Veen was probably one of the most courageous men I ever met. Willem Arondeus was also courageous. He was a sort of knight. He had a great disdain for danger, while Gerrit van der Veen was, I felt, fearful by nature. Gerrit had to make an enormous effort to defeat his fear and I call him courageous because he completely overcame that fear. That is a very important factor. You can be courageous by nature and you can be completely uncourageous and yet, driven by necessity, become courageous. I remember that he often said: *I put greater value on my children saying later: we had a courageous father than saying: we still have a father, but he's a coward.* Frits van Hall was an exceptionally talented sculptor, perhaps rather classical, but that is a characteristic of the style at the time. He had Indonesian blood in him and I think that can be seen in his work. That gave it a certain elegance and perhaps also a touch of the exotic. He died young, perishing on the way back from the concentration camp in Germany. And thus he was unable to develop further.

There was a very convivial atmosphere in this group of people. Actually, we really loved each other, but naturally characters clash from time to time. At a given moment, Tikkie – that was Willem Arondeus – came to the museum and said: *I'm bloody finished. I can't work with Gerrit anymore. He arrives at every meeting one or two hours late, and I won't stand it anymore. He can get to things on time. When he made that bust of Juliana, he arrived at Loo Palace on time. Why can't he be on time for me? It is pure discrimination.* Tikkie would explode like this on occasions. He was really offended and I said: *Let's discuss it together, the*

three of us. We did that shortly afterwards in the office of the Stedelijk Museum and Tikkie really went to town on Gerrit: *I sat waiting then and then in the American for two hours, and I won't stand it. You're always too late. That's not any use in the attack.* He repeated the story about Juliana, about the bust he made of her and said: *That's not right.* Anyway, the argument got very heated and Gerrit improved, in any case with regard to Arondeus. He understood that it was a type of discrimination if he treated him differently than the princess. That was a typical example of a heartfelt argument

There was also another group that discussed future plans a lot. That group was mainly made up of Johan Brouwer, Arondeus, myself and sometimes also Koen Limperg. We discussed setting up a magazine together or a newspaper and all sorts of fantastic ideals.

I think that the artists resistance and the role that the artists played in the whole Dutch resistance plus the foundation of the Federation, gave the artists in the Netherlands a different forum than they had before. The attitude is no longer one of: *Here come the actors, wife, go bring in the washing.* Naturally not enough has happened but I have the idea that today artists play a different role in society than they did in the 'twenties and 'thirties. We didn't really speak much about that in this group. Arondeus was totally convinced that he would be able to realise his ideals of publication and similar things after the war. On the other hand, he also had that feeling he shared with so many other members of the resistance of: *I'm now risking everything and I will meet my end. And he did meet his end.* In the 'Anklageverfügung' by the Germans, they say of Arondeus that they had an enormous appreciation for his personality; that he was a typical military figure. That was remarkable praise from that side, but I can well imagine that he made an impression on the interrogators by the way he answered them.

Many people, after they had spend a whole year in hiding and had taken all necessary precautions, stopped being careful. They lost their control and were exposed. That happened to Frans Duwaer, who had printed the identity papers. Gerrit van de Veen had said to him: *Frans, if I am ever taken prisoner, I promise you that I will keep my mouth shut for a week. But then I will assume that you have all got away and I will tell them anything they can get out of me.* When Gerrit was taken prisoner, Frans Duwaer first came to me and we

made plans together for freeing Gerrit. But Gerrit had been shot in the back and could hardly walk. He was executed, standing between two comrades who helped him stay on his feet. He was unable to stand unaided.

Gerrit was in prison and Frans was planning to go into hiding on the sixth day after his arrest. On the sixth, or seventh day, he left the house with his suitcase, but then realised that he was deserting the family printing works. He went back to his house, unpacked his suitcase, went downstairs, and came face to face with the Gestapo. That was on 8 June 1944. On the 10th, he was executed by firing squad together with Gerrit.

The liberation had hardly taken place before we got together again. Then the two committees were merged. We met somewhere on the Herengracht and that was where we established the Federation. The first chairman was, if I remember rightly, Nico Donkersloot. He was succeeded, for a short time, by Kees van der Leeuw, the former director of the Van Nelle factories. I became chairman in 1947 and held the position for four years. In the city council, people felt that the chairmanship of the Federation could not be combined with the job of city civil servant, but I always ignored them. I felt that a civil servant was free to spend his spare time as he wished.

The Federation was the first Federation of professional associations for artists. Before and during the war, the painters in particular had not had any professional association. There were exhibition associations, where people thought and worked in the same direction, met together and organised exhibitions together. This was the same in different areas. Nor did the musicians have a professional association, and so the Federation first insisted that all artists should organise themselves in professional associations. This had already happened with the architects and the applied artists, designers and so on were already organised in the VANK. We actually left that VANK for what it was and we set up a new foundation, the GKF, Gebonden Kunstenaars behorende bij de Federatie [the Bond of Artists belonging to the Federation]. That has now partly become the forefather of the GVN, Graphische Vormgevers in Nederland [Graphic Designers in the Netherlands]. And so the artist

associations were formed relatively quickly and the Federation as a whole began functioning very speedily. Eduard Veterman was the first Secretary. He died rather quickly, but he had had a cell mate while in prison: Jan Kassies. Kassies spent much of the war behind bars. He had learned a lot from Veterman and when Veterman needed a deputy secretary, that was automatically Jan Kassies. He had at the time just turned twenty. After Veterman died, Kassies took over, and we all know his further career. He is sufficiently well known as director of the school of acting in Amsterdam.

The Federation had a difficult existence financially. In the beginning there was a great mutual unity, with one exception. We had always thought that the architects, as creative artists, should be part of the Federation. A number of the architects thought differently. I held endless discussions with representatives of the architects and they made a whole range of demands. When those demands were granted, new ones were added. Ultimately, it came to nothing because the architects in Zeeland did not want to participate in a Federation which also included dancers. That was, in their Christian conviction, unacceptable. I remember that we held difficult negotiations for years on end with these people and that particularly in that province there were people who said: *no, we belong more to the group of notaries, lawyers and doctors than to the artists.*