

# The many lives of writer Jef Last (1898-1972)

Anti-fascist, socialist, humanist and  
gay rights activist

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**Abstract** Writer, poet, painter, journalist, translator and compelling speaker: Jef Last roamed the globe, fought in the Spanish Civil War, joined the Dutch resistance during the Nazi occupation, and became an outspoken gay rights activist during and after World War II. His political journey started in 1917 when he joined the Social Democratic Workers Party. From there he had brief yet tumultuous stints in the Revolutionary Socialist Party of Henk Sneevliet and the Dutch Communist Party. Disappointed with socialism and the Soviet Union, he identified as a humanist in later life. Last was controversial yet appealing, and both selfish and selfless. Difficult to categorise, Last insisted on the indivisibility of his identity and experiences as an antifascist fighter and a gay man. This biographical article explores the many social identities of Jef Last.

**Keywords** Jef Last, Spanish Civil War, Dutch Resistance, gay activism

**R**esistance was part of the DNA of Dutch writer, poet and translator Jef Last. He was always willing to give his life for his ideals, and always obstinate. But always with good reason. He followed his own conscience, his sincere sense of justice, and his intense dislike of hypocritical bourgeois morality. He propagated these ideals through his books

and speeches. He published more than one hundred works, from novels to poetry, from essays about China and Japan to books for children.

Resistance was desperately needed during his lifetime. Last came of age in a world full of wars and social conflicts. Involving himself in everything, he became a committed socialist at a young age. Last provided food for Belgian refugees in Amsterdam during World War I, campaigned for better conditions for workers during the Great Depression, pioneered Avant-Garde films in the Netherlands, smuggled German/Jewish intellectuals and artists into Belgium and France in the early 1930s, fought in the Spanish Civil War, was active in the Dutch resistance during World War II, fought against colonialism and for the independence of the Dutch East Indies, broke the taboo on homosexuality, and spoke out against the horrors of the Cultural Revolution in China. He was also a true cosmopolitan: he spoke thirteen languages and travelled extensively around the world. Gifted, complex, difficult, intriguing: a man who lived many lives.

This article, which is based on my biography about Last, titled *Bestaat er een raarder leven dan het mijne?* ('Does a life stranger than mine exist?') published in 2021, explores the many social identities of Last. A celebrated writer who was both ahead of his time and behind the scenes and who insisted on the indivisibility of his identity and experiences as an antifascist fighter and a gay man.<sup>1</sup>

## A young socialist

Last was born on 2 May 1898 (as a dedicated socialist, he always regretted that he wasn't born on 1 May). He came from a wealthy bourgeois family in The Hague, with roots in what was then the Dutch East Indies. His father was an Inspector of Labour and the family had to move frequently because of this job. Last's parents – his father was a frugal and authoritarian Protestant, and his mother was an extravagant and artistic Catholic – fought like cat and dog. Young Last grew up between these two extremes. He was spoiled, unruly and kicked out of all the schools he attended. Wildly intelligent, he passed his high school exams despite not being enrolled in school, and in 1918 was accepted at

the University of Leiden to study Chinese culture and language. A year previously, Last had secretly joined the *Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij* (Social Democratic Workers Party, or SDAP) and had become the leader of the newly founded *Arbeiders Jeugd Centrale* (a social-democratic youth organisation) in Leiden. He gave away his precious and valuable stamp collection, which he had inherited from his grandfather: 'A socialist does not appreciate inheritances. Stamp collecting is bourgeois and childish', he wrote in his memoirs.<sup>2</sup>

It was around this time that he became serious about writing poetry. As the editor of *Virtus*, a student magazine at Leiden University, Last contributed fiery articles. He shared observations including this one:

Have intellectuals ever shown any interest and care in working-class youth? We must educate young people! For they have never had the opportunity to enjoy a painting, nature, or a book. You must realise how rich you are in terms of knowledge, development, and civilisation.<sup>3</sup>

Increasingly, Last felt tension between his identities as a socialist and as a student, between the, in his eyes, simple life of workers and that of the Leiden snobby elite. Meanwhile, he had met Ida ter Haar, a rebellious daughter of bourgeois parents, who worked in a *Volkshuis* in Rotterdam. This establishment, a 'dry' meeting place for the working class, was one of the many that had mushroomed all over the Netherlands, which were usually run by energetic women, mainly bourgeois socialists. Ter Haar and Last were remarkably compatible. They shared the same ideals and didn't care about the expectations of their social class. Both chose their own way, sometimes together and sometimes separately. But they were always connected by their strong desire to mean something to the world. In consultation with Ter Haar, Last made the decision to break with his parents and become a deep-sea sailor. It was the start of a brand-new chapter in his life.

After spending months in Singapore and the United States, Last, having arrived back in the Netherlands, decided to 'join the proletariat' in 1925. He wanted to be a worker among workers. Factory jobs, however, didn't pay much, and Last and his family – he had married Ter Haar

and the couple had had two daughters – now experienced poverty. This caused Last and his wife to radicalise further. He wrote about this time:

Our world was that of the SDAP, the belief in the power of social reform ... The SDAP was an atheistic church with an extensive parish, charitable works, and all that goes with it. Its dogmas were quite simple: for socialism without violent revolution, for universal suffrage, the right to strike and the eight-hour day, for the republic; against capitalism, militarism, nationalism, monarchy, colonialism, and alcohol.<sup>4</sup>

Last's speeches and writing became increasingly vehement, his views increasingly radical. To his great fortune, he was appointed leader of the *Instituut voor Arbeidersontwikkeling* (Film Department of the Dutch Institute for Workers' Development, or IvAO) in Amsterdam, which was founded in 1924 by the SDAP. Between 1925 and 1928, he toured the entire country in a second-hand Ford delivery van – which he had christened 'The Red Automobile' – to screen films like *Battleship Potemkin* for farmers and workers. And to entice them to join a union.<sup>5</sup>

## Enfant terrible

As soon would become a pattern, the short-tempered and fickle Last got into a fight and was fired. He realised that he was better able to express himself in writing. He became the personification of the anti-colonial protest in 1926/27 and advocated for the independence of the Dutch East Indies with poems in numerous left-wing magazines such as *Eenheid*, *De Socialist*, *Bevrijding*, *De Nieuwe Weg*, *Recht en Vrijheid* and *De Notenkraker*, the SDAP's satirical weekly. In addition, he self-published the song collections *Liedjes op de maat van de rottan* and *De wind speelt op het galgentouw* in 1929.<sup>6</sup> Last's poems and songs were inspired by the crimes of Dutch imperialism in Indonesia, in which he sided with Indonesian communists and other radicals. His collections were very popular and made him a prominent figure in the world of Dutch social-revolutionary literature.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the young revolutionary felt increasingly attracted to the Dutch Communist Party. He admired communists because they sought a world revolution of workers, and felt inspired by the political slogan 'Workers of the world, unite'. In a long letter dated 15 January 1930, Last said his goodbyes to the SDAP, reproaching the party for becoming all talk and no action, and labelling their politics as 'colonial treason'.<sup>7</sup> But before joining the Communist Party, he first joined the even smaller *Revolutionaire Socialistische Partij* (Revolutionary Socialist Party or RSP). His career within this party and the closely affiliated *Nationaal Arbeids-Secretariaat* (National Labour Secretariat or NAS), a Dutch trade union federation, was short but impressive. Appointed by party leader Henk Sneevliet, Last became the secretary of NAS's Committee for Social Legislation, and president of the RSP's *Revolutionaire Jeugdbond* (Revolutionary Youth League), as well as editor of the latter's publication *Opstand! Een spreekkoor*. At home and abroad, as a charismatic speaker, Last urged his audience to act. He wrote activist articles in *De Arbeid* (the NAS publication) and *De Baanbreker* (an independent socialist weekly for politics and culture).

With his novella collection *Marianne*, which was published in 1930, Last cemented his position as the socialist face of Dutch literature. Even today, *Marianne* is rousing literature because of Last's deliberate choice of an angle to unsettle and awaken the reader. In six novellas that differ in form but are related in content, Last glorifies the revolution, in the person of Marianne, a 'modern saint who gives meaning to the life of the proletariat', through suddenly appearing in the lives of ordinary people: a young machine bench worker, a civil servant, a farmer, a prostitute and a socialist. All rise above themselves when they come into contact with Marianne and are inspired by the idea of a social revolution. In all the stories, the main characters are unemployed, there is widespread poverty and a severe housing shortage, and the threats of war and fascism are looming. Against this the people must revolt. Accordingly, the last novella ends with the words, 'Marianne's voice: Awake, outcasts of the earth!'.<sup>8</sup>

While it is unlikely that the book was widely read by workers, it was well-received by literary critics, and Last became one of the most respected writers in the interwar period. In fact, according to Jacqueline

Bel, professor of Dutch Studies at the VU University in Amsterdam, Last was one of the most committed and productive writers of the interwar period in the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup>

### **Apprentice-communist**

Last could only tolerate someone above him in any hierarchy if he also admired that person. And Henk Sneevliet was indeed an admirable man, who enjoyed great international standing. A communist international functionary, Sneevliet had known Trotsky, Lenin, Stalin and Luxembourg, had been at the cradle of the Chinese revolution, and had founded the first trade union in Indonesia. The rapport between Last and Sneevliet was therefore excellent at first. But gradually it began to fray, mainly because of the unequal relationship between these two strong personalities. Sneevliet was the absolute leader of the RSP and Last merely his protégé. Disagreements between the two men began two months after Last joined the RSP. In their assessment of the Soviet Union, for example, they were not on the same page.<sup>10</sup> Sneevliet emphasised the abuses that accompanied industrialisation and collectivisation and the fact that the goals set were far from being achieved.<sup>11</sup> Last, on the other hand, believed that the forced industrialisation and collectivisation were essentially great socialist projects that, despite the lapses that occurred, should be applauded.<sup>12</sup> Slowly but surely, it became a straightforward power struggle. When Last, as he had done with the SDAP leadership, began to criticise Sneevliet in public, the latter had had enough. Although this conflict was initially smoothed over, three months later it came to a final split.<sup>13</sup>

Last realised that working in politics wasn't for him and decided that he wanted to support his family – by now he had three daughters – with his income from writing. But first, he wanted to see with his own eyes exactly how the situation was in the Soviet Union. Were the workers there really about to unleash the world revolution he had been waiting for? With letters of recommendation from leading communists in his pocket, he left for Moscow in early 1932.<sup>14</sup> However, things didn't really work out for him. Whilst his intention had been to be a worker among workers, it was decided for him that, as an 'apprentice commu-

nist', he should work at the Bibliographical Institute of the Library of Foreign Languages in Moscow as a researcher within Dutch literature to supply material for the entry 'Holland' in the *Literary Encyclopaedia*. Despondent, he wrote to Ter Haar on 14 April 1932:

They are happy at the MORP [International Association of Proletarian Writers] that they have finally caught a Dutch writer ... I must earn my living here for the time being (five months) as a writer. Only when I have done that properly will I be sent to a factory.<sup>15</sup>

The first months were tough for Last: he had no reference books and was not sent any books from the Netherlands; letters from Ter Haar arrived only sporadically; and he lived in a shabby little room where 'the wall lice held demonstrations along the bare walls at night with banners and music'.<sup>16</sup> The Russians had promised him a trip through the Urals, but this was always postponed. Maddened by all that waiting and waiting, the aspiring communist toiled on. Then one day, on 15 July 1932, he received permission, or rather, was obligated, to make the trip. He was assigned as travelling companions the French surrealist and hard-core communist Louis Aragon, the Polish-Jewish-American author Isaac Platner and the Hungarian avant-garde poet Sándor Barta. Louis Aragon's friend, poet Elsa Triolet, went along as interpreter, because, as sister-in-law of the famous poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, she spoke fluent Russian. Little did they know that the main purpose of this trip was to show off the transformation of the Urals region into a powerful industrial base. All four writers fell into the trap that was this propaganda trip *par excellence*. Louis Aragon later wrote the collection of poems *Hourra l' Oural* about it, and Last *Het stalen fundament*.<sup>17</sup> It is the only book he was later ashamed of and wished he had never written. During his stay in Moscow, the scales had fallen from his eyes. He'd seen carts that picked up the corpses of people who had died of hunger during the night, and poor people begging for kopecks. He didn't give them anything, because that 'would not have been communist'.<sup>18</sup> He was also struggling himself: he did not get the salary that was promised to him. Worse even, the Soviet Communist Party disregarded his desire for real working-class life as 'romanticism' and continued to refuse his requests to work in a factory. Last was 'condemned' to the international writers'

club. He did make many friends there: the Ukrainian-Jewish journalist Ilya Ehrenburg, the Austrian-Czech writer Egon Erwin Kisch, the French politician-writer Henri Barbusse and the German women's rights activist Clara Zetkin. Many of them he was to encounter again as comrades in arms in the Spanish Civil War. But he hadn't gone to Moscow to meet writers. Disillusioned, he returned to Amsterdam at the end of 1932.

## Communist and homosexual

In early 1933, Last joined the Dutch Communist Party and immediately became very active. How can we reconcile his disillusionment with the Soviet Union with his fanatical commitment to the Communist Party? In his letters from the Soviet Union, Last had already indicated that his unshakable faith in the future of that immense country stemmed mainly from his despair at what capitalism had done to the West, which was marked by widespread unemployment and crippling poverty, with no prospect of any improvement. He also saw that people were losing faith in parliamentary democracy, because their elected politicians had no solution to these problems, and were being driven toward fascism as a result. Regardless of his negative experiences while there, he continued to believe that the Soviet Union was the answer. After all, with its exuberant socialist ideals, and through the building of an economically strong country, the Soviet Union wanted to prevent fascism and the impending danger of a second world war.

In 1934, desperate for money to support his family, Last embarked on a new writing project, a novel titled *Zuiderzee*, about the creation of the IJsselmeer. During the research phase of this book, he worked as a casual labourer on the Zuiderzee Works for two months, and visited the island of Urk to gather information about the impact of the *afsluiddijk* on its local fishing community. There, he met Auke, a fisherman, and fell in love.<sup>19</sup> His novel, *Zuiderzee*, mirrors his experiences and blends fact and fiction. Aside from documenting the growing unemployment among the people of Urk, their faith in God, and their doubts about whether there would be enough fish left in the IJsselmeer, it describes the life of a fisherman named Auke and his love for his girl, Boukje.



Halfway through the novel, the story takes an unexpected turn. Auke finds himself longing for his friend and fellow fisherman Theun.<sup>20</sup>

In his memoirs, Last writes about his trip to Urk: ‘My possibilities of sublimation suddenly fall away. After 10 years of happy marriage and perfectly normal behaviour, the gay factor suddenly breaks through violently. I fall in love with Auke ... I work on the Zuiderzee Works and write *Zuiderzee*’.<sup>21</sup>

Sublimation? His fanatical commitment to political parties, his poems and novels, his hundreds of articles and pamphlets that call readers to stand up against capitalism – all these as sublimation for his repressed feelings?<sup>22</sup> It is certainly the case that even Last himself concluded that ‘for a long time he had sublimated his sexual feelings into fierce political involvement’.<sup>23</sup> After this pivotal event, Last’s interest in communism faded and his struggle for the social acceptance of homosexuality became increasingly important. Indeed, with his novel *Zuiderzee*, Last was among the first to break the taboo on homosexuality in Dutch literature, and, more generally, in society.

Homosexuality was unmentionable in the Netherlands in the 1930s. The police and the church regularly checked libraries to make sure they did not carry any obscene novels – including gay-oriented novels – on their shelves. And, according to Article 248bis of the Penal Code, sexual contact with someone of the same sex between the ages of 16 and 21 was punishable by four years in prison, while for heterosexuals the age of consent was 16. Worse was the social punishment for homosexuality in the then very church-going Netherlands: gay men and women were outcasts. Within the international communist movement, homosexuality was increasingly seen as ideologically hostile, culminating in the Russian writer Maxim Gorky’s slogan: ‘Exterminate the homosexuals, and fascism is destroyed’.<sup>24</sup> This slogan, according to Last, gave rise to the new Russian laws denouncing homosexuality as a degenerate phenomenon of the fascist bourgeoisie and criminalising homosexual acts. Last felt torn. He completely disagreed with the movement’s views on homosexuality; but, still, he remained a dedicated communist.<sup>25</sup>

And how did Ter Haar cope with her husband’s coming out? At the time, both spouses were deeply impressed by the books of the radical psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who advocated sexual and existential

liberation from a repressive society. Living together was very beautiful, wrote Last in his memoirs, but this did not mean being 'each other's property like a farmer has a cow, which he can slaughter if he wants. I had my wife, I loved my wife, and I had a boyfriend and I loved him too, and that was a completely different kind of love. And that was accepted by both of us for a time'.<sup>26</sup> For a time, yes, because Ter Haar put him out on the street on a regular basis. But that didn't bother Last. He travelled around and had friends all over Europe that he could turn to. He was in the prime of his life, a 37-year-old handsome man, always tanned because he loved sunbathing, with light blue eyes and a firm jawline – and tough-looking too, in his black leather jacket. He visited male prostitutes in Amsterdam, Antwerp and Paris because he had always had a soft spot for people at the bottom of society. However, life wasn't all fun and games. It was the 1930s, and the rise of fascism made the world a dangerous place. Almost every month, Last brought German refugees, including Jews, homosexuals and communists, to his ever-growing group of socialist friends in Paris. He then took other 'illegals' back with him to Belgium and Holland, where he hid them with fellow party members and sympathisers. His efforts weren't without risk: the Dutch police preyed on 'smugglers' in those years.<sup>27</sup>

Last was hardly ever at home with his family. His daughter, Ankie, commented laconically during one of our interviews: 'He was there so little, and he was so self-absorbed, that it was more like an interesting person we knew, than a father'. Ter Haar, meanwhile, had started a children's theatre in Amsterdam. Here she could use her talents: she wrote the song lyrics and plays herself. Soon her children's theatre group was such a success that it performed in major theatres in the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark. Ter Haar had found her destiny and was able to sustain her family. Her three daughters were also involved, and described their childhood, from that moment onward, as 'wonderful'.

## **Enfin! André Gide**

Despite the economic crisis of the 1930s, Paris buzzed with cultural activity. The theatres were packed, nightlife flourished, and writers

from all over the world debated with each other in the literary salon of the American Gertrude Stein or in the countless cafés on the Rive Gauche.<sup>28</sup> It was not for nothing that Last felt at home in the City of Light. It was also the place where he met his soulmate, André Gide.

After Last had smuggled yet another refugee into Paris, he was asked by the party to speak at the congress of the *Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires* in October 1934, chaired by André Gide. There the then 64-year-old Gide and the 36-year-old Last were introduced to each other, and they became very close soon afterwards. In a letter to Claude Mauriac, Gide recalled the great impression Last had made on him:

What an extraordinary boy! ... What dedication! What fire! What generosity! He never has a penny, even though his books sell very well, because he always has needy comrades around him to whom he provides food and shelter. He is a jack of all trades. He knows all languages.<sup>29</sup>

Their meeting came at a good time for both. Gide, a successful author, who had written *Corydon*, a defence of pederasty, in 1924, was at a literary standstill. And Last, too, was at a dead end. He no longer wanted to write literature that could be used as a weapon in the class struggle, for that struggle seemed to him increasingly in vain. It was in this vacuum of both their lives that they met. It is unlikely, however, that their relationship was more than a very close friendship. What they immediately recognised in each other was their non-conformism, and their contrariness. And the things they discussed most were their sexuality, communism, and their staunch belief that youth would make everything better. They spent days and weeks together, and when they weren't together, they corresponded frequently.<sup>30</sup>

Gide took Last on a long vacation to Morocco in the spring of 1935. Here Last found himself in a society where European homosexuals could be themselves. At the time, Morocco was renowned as a haven for gay Westerners, who fled restrictions in their own countries to take advantage of its relaxed jurisdiction.<sup>31</sup> Last thoroughly enjoyed his time there. He felt inspired by his surroundings, and in less than two months,

he had written his novel *Een huis zonder venster*; a collection of novellas; *Voor de mast*; and a collection of poems, *De bevrijde Eros*. The latter is considered among his best works.

Last's vacation in Morocco formed a brief escape from an increasingly complicated world. Hitler was advancing, Nazis were burning books, and fascism was spreading rapidly throughout Europe and beyond. He now joined the international fight against fascism. In 1935, he was invited to speak at the First International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture in Paris, held from 21 to 25 June. As the situation in Germany and Italy grew grimmer by the day, artists and intellectuals longed for an international forum where they could take a clear stand against the dangers that threatened culture. An impressive literary front emerged, in the same spirit as the Popular Front more widely. The organisation of the aforementioned congress was in the hands of the French writers' union, but the costs were paid, silently, by Moscow. A burned-out André Gide led the congress, and speakers included E.M. Forster, Robert Musil, Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, Boris Pasternak, Aldous Huxley and Klaus Mann. According to Maria van Rysseberghe, the congress became an 'unexpected triumph': 2,500 to 3,000 people – students, writers, workers, artists, intellectuals and journalists from all over the world – gathered every night to listen to the speakers.<sup>32</sup>

## A second trip to USSR

In 1936, Gide invited Last (who by now spoke fluent Russian) to join him on a trip to the Soviet Union, alongside publisher Jacques Schiffrin, writer Pierre Herbart, interpreter-translator Louis Guilloux and writer Eugène Dabit. The trip turned out to be disastrous, in every way. The days were filled with official visits to 'education' camps, endless dinners with lots of speeches, boring film screenings, and tedious receptions. Everywhere the *Marseillaise* was played for the famous guest. But Gide became increasingly angry; the fake enthusiasm and grovelling tributes irritated him immensely. Last, however, felt flattered by all this attention, and enjoyed the abundance of food after having experienced poverty in the Netherlands.<sup>33</sup>

As part of the itinerary, the group drove by car to Tiflis through desolate landscapes, and visited power plants and dams. In Tiflis, Louis Guilloux was the first to leave. The rest travelled on to Gory in Georgia, Stalin's birthplace. Gide wanted to send Stalin a thank-you telegram from the post office there, but his salutation 'Comrade Stalin' was immediately dismissed by their 'watchdog', Bola. Stalin was supposed to be addressed as 'Leader of Nations', the honorific title given to Stalin by party members. 'But I am not a party member', Gide protested, 'and I cannot possibly believe that Stalin would appreciate such flattery'. 'Stalin hates flattery', replied Bola, 'but he will certainly appreciate being spoken to appropriately'. The telegram was never sent.<sup>34</sup>

In Yalta, the situation came to a head. Gide was overtired and did not leave his room. And Last felt increasingly agitated by the news from Spain: 'I felt very strongly that this civil war would decide the fate of Europe and that the final reckoning between fascism and democracy was at hand', he wrote in *Mijn vriend André Gide*.<sup>35</sup> When Eugène Dabit suddenly fell seriously ill in mid-August, the company parted ways: Gide, Herbart and Schifffrin decided to return to Moscow immediately, Last stayed behind to take care of Dabit. After being assured by the doctors that his sick comrade's health was improving, he too left for Moscow. Eugène Dabit died on 21 August 1936. He was thirty-seven years old. It is very likely that he had been poisoned.

After this trip, Gide's love for the Soviet Union was forever over and done with, and the feeling was mutual. But Last had not yet reached that point. In hindsight, he admitted that in 1936 he had had enough and was deeply disappointed with the Soviet Union. However, he had tried to convince himself that the country was in a period of transition and that the Spanish Civil War would ignite a new development in communism.<sup>36</sup> On 29 August 1936 he wrote to Gide: 'As I read the information about the events in Spain, I realise more and more that the time for talking and congresses is over and that there is only one thing left to do: fight'.<sup>37</sup>

Last was a pacifist, he had a family with three children, and yet he went. The fight against fascism and against the – in his eyes imminent – approach of a Second World War won out over his pacifist principles.

## The Spanish Civil War

When fascism triumphs in Spain, then ... nothing will stand in the way of the plans for the conquest of Italy and Germany. When fascism triumphs, then not only my books will be burned, but the books of all those whom I hold in high esteem as artists and spiritual leaders of humanity ... When fascism triumphs, my friends who I have among the Jews will be exiled or imprisoned in concentration camps ... When fascism triumphs, thought is outlawed, science is shackled, hatred is declared the ideal, and public opinion is made by the ministry of public falsehood, then with it life itself loses its meaning, then everything that once seemed to me clean or dignified or fair is lost ... It is better to die standing than to live kneeling.<sup>38</sup>

Last arrived in Spain in late September 1936. Intuitively, he joined a militia of simple Spanish workers, the Sargento Vázquez battalion, not the International Brigades. Because this battalion was one of the few combat units that wasn't under the control of the Spanish Communist Party, Soviet communists distrusted Last right from the start.<sup>39</sup> Soon he was put in charge of a company of the Fourth Regiment. This company wasn't yet trained at the time he joined, and its members had to learn to arrive at roll call on time ('Time is an elastic concept in Spain', noted Last in one of his letters to Ter Haar), and how to handle weapons. It is curious that someone as undisciplined as Last was able to discipline this group of young, often illiterate, peasants and workers. His men's revolutionary fervour and heroism would not on their own be enough to stop fascism, and Last was forced to be strict.<sup>40</sup> Amateurism was widespread among the untrained volunteers on the Republican side, while the Nationalists and their allies were armed to the teeth and well-trained. Moreover, they were aided by the Nazi and Italian air forces. The troops and fighter planes promised by Stalin, however, never came. As a result, it was a very unequal battle.

By now it was winter and getting cold. When there was no fighting to be done, Last and his men stayed in abandoned cottages. Last struggled with neglected bronchitis, coughed profusely, and lost his voice shouting

orders. He was patched up with a medicine of warm condensed milk with a splash of brandy in it. Life was tough in the cottages, which had been shot to pieces on all sides:

For twelve days already we have been living in these ruins. Everything we touch is dirty, even the water from the well is muddy ... The sidewalk in front of our house, the only piece of street not in the line of fire, is impassable because of the excrement of 140 soldiers. For twelve days we have not changed our clothes, three times we have fought attacks, eight hours a day we are at our posts.<sup>41</sup>

Tired of fighting in these harsh conditions, many soldiers, on both sides, deserted. This was why Last initially hesitated when he received clearance to go on a three-week propaganda tour through Holland, Belgium and France; he did not want to appear as a deserter. But after a successful tour, he returned to his beloved company, on 26 January 1937, and wrote:

Yes, I am proud of my company, proud and happy. She is my life's work, worth more to me than any of the books I have ever written. She is not just a military unit, she is a community of friends, a small piece of the socialism for which I have lived.<sup>42</sup>

Every now and then Last was allowed to go on leave to Madrid. There he engaged in public speaking on a regular basis. After the strategically important city of Malaga fell into the hands of the Nationalists, he tried to encourage his listeners on Spanish radio during a speech broadcasted on 1 March 1937: 'We know that this struggle is a long one ... *No pasaran*: they shall not pass, whatever sacrifices it may take'.<sup>43</sup> He also told listeners about a young man from his company, Felix, who, after his entire family, father, mother, and 11 siblings had been killed with a single bomb, wanted to be trained as a *dynamitero* out of anger. This was Last at his best: passionate, inspiring, with an eye for human detail and for the stories of the common man, and with an unshakable belief in youth. On Dutch radio, he encouraged his fellow countrymen to do more for Spain, to send

more money and goods. Or if necessary to come themselves, even though doing so was illegal and punishable by a loss of Dutch citizenship.<sup>44</sup>

Last was eventually promoted to the rank of officer in the Spanish People's Army, and he fought on bravely with his *milicias*. They lost at the battle of Getafe, a suburb of Madrid, but won on other fronts around Madrid: Cuesta de las Reinas, Puerte de San Fernando, El Pardo, Las Rosas. Beautiful names for horrible trenches. During this period, Last continued to take leaves in Madrid, where he would frequent Hotel Gran Via, because, 'here the foreigners gather, journalists, scholars, cineastes ... For us, coming from the front, it means a connection with the outside world, and the latest news from America, France and England. I find there ... Hemingway and ... Joris Ivens'.<sup>45</sup>

But soon problems began to arise in his hitherto flawless military career. Not because of the fighting itself, but because of the intrigues of Stalinist Soviet infiltrators in the republican militias. Secret reports with suspicions that were mostly about non-Soviet fighters flew back and forth between the communist parties in Spain, France, the Netherlands, the United States and England. Anyone who expressed the slightest doubt about Stalin's good intentions was investigated and labelled as a Trotskyist. Or simply executed. Last was also scrutinised. He was sent to a training institute for young recruits in Albacete, more than 250 kilometres from the Madrid front, and was denied the rank of commander of the Dutch-Flemish battalion of the 11th Brigade. The reason? According to a German report that at the time was secret: 'Jef Last was not included in the 11th Brigade because it was well known that he was a notorious Trotskyist and a close friend of André Gide and of other Trotskyist elements'.<sup>46</sup>

Last was several times court-martialled, and forced to refute false accusations made against him, for example about his participation in a congress of the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification, or POUM, a Trotskyist organisation) in Barcelona. Fortunately, he was afraid 'neither of bullets at the front nor of those coming from behind'.<sup>47</sup> His friends André Malraux and André Gide, however, feared for his wellbeing and felt that Last needed to leave the country. They managed to arrange an invitation for him from the Norwegian Spain Committee, to travel there to raise awareness and money for the struggle.



## From communist to humanist socialist

At first glance, Last's stay in Scandinavia from December 1937 to March 1938 seemed good: he learned Swedish, Norwegian and Danish in a matter of weeks, and was a sought-after public speaker. This 'Flying Dutchman', who looked younger than his 39 years, and who was 'charming, quick and somehow boyish in his appearance', was embraced by the locals.<sup>48</sup> He was still a party member, but, back home, his popularity was waning inside the communist movement. He was accused by his fellow communists of having deserted the Spanish People's Army. And, to compound his troubles, Ter Haar now filed for divorce. On 9 February 1938, Last informed the district court in Amsterdam by letter that it was known to him that Ter Haar would file a claim for divorce against him and that he would not oppose this claim. Ter Haar was keen to continue performing abroad with her theatre troupe *De Vrolijke Brigade*, and this had become impossible because, as the wife of a stateless person, she had also become stateless, as had her three children. The only solution was to divorce. The initiative had come from Ter Haar, their daughter Ankie recounted in an interview,

My mother wanted to perform in Denmark with her *Vrolijke Brigade*, but that was not possible without a passport. And anyway, my mother said, for every decision I make I must have the permission of Jef, who is in Spain or God knows where. So she divorced him. She also said: 'What does it matter? We were really raised with the idea that a bit of paper didn't mean much.' Still, my father was quite devastated.

Last was summoned by Ter Haar, through a lawyer, to appear in court on 31 March in order to hear the decree of divorce pronounced on the basis of the most common reason at that time: adultery. The divorce became a fact. On 28 May, Ter Haar was awarded custody of their daughters Femke, Ankie and Mieke.<sup>49</sup> On 13 July the mayor of Amsterdam officially restored their Dutch citizenship.<sup>50</sup>

While the divorce was emotionally devastating for Jef, leaving the

Dutch Communist Party was perhaps even more so. The trip with Gide through the Soviet Union in 1936, and the behaviour of the Soviet communists in the Spanish Civil War, had led to slowly but steadily increasing doubts. But when he learned in February 1938 of the role the communists had played in the fall of the provincial capital of Teruel, which had left 60,000 Republicans dead and wounded, his faith in communism was over and done with: 'I knew', he wrote in his memoirs, 'that Teruel was lost because the Russians did not supply arms to a Catalan government that included anarchists'. The famous German playwright Bertolt Brecht reportedly tried to talk him out of leaving the movement, but to no avail, Last's mind was made up.<sup>51</sup> On 1 March 1938, he officially left the CPN, after five years of membership. On 2 March, dozens of newspapers in the Netherlands, from *De Telegraaf* to the *Nieuwe Venlosche Courant*, published announcements that Last had resigned from the CPN because of the Soviet Union's lack of support for Spain. The same day, the CPN secretariat hit back in *Het Volksdagblad* under the headline 'A deserter', which read, among other things, 'No doubt the last word has not yet been spoken on this matter. However, Last can already count on widespread contempt among honest workers'.<sup>52</sup> In addition, they accused him of colluding with the POUM and spying for Franco's forces.<sup>53</sup> Moscow also immediately retaliated by banning and destroying the Russian translation of *Zuiderzee*, which had appeared in an edition of 200,000 copies in early 1938.<sup>54</sup>

Last responded by publishing a new book. From the trenches around Madrid, he had written almost weekly letters to Ter Haar about his experiences and the course of the battle. In 1938, he published these letters in his famous *De Spaanse tragedie*. It had become clear to him, he wrote in the book's afterword, that the vision in which the present is sacrificed to the future, and in which the end justifies the means, is profoundly inhuman. He closed with words that became a statement of principles for his continued partyless life: 'Let us reclaim the right to love, the right to one's own convictions, the right to respect even the enemy, when we are convinced of his honesty'.<sup>55</sup> *De Spaanse tragedie* was held by many a critic to be of the same standard as Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*.

With his departure from the CPN, Last parted with the belief that a collective ideology could mean something positive for humanity. He now – as the individualist he had always been – took on the responsibility of protecting democracy anywhere in the world by standing up for the weaker members of society. A humanistic socialism now became his guiding principle. But he remained rebellious: ‘A man who is truly alive must be in constant conflict with society’, became his motto.<sup>56</sup>

## Gay activism and anti-fascism in WWII

Having lost his Dutch citizenship by fighting in Spain, Last was not mobilised when the Netherlands was attacked by Germany on 10 May 1940. But by 15 May the Netherlands had surrendered, after the bombing of the city of Rotterdam. Last bicycled from Amsterdam to Rotterdam to see if Ter Haar and the children, who were living there at the time, were unharmed. They were. Then he immediately went into hiding.<sup>57</sup> As a ‘communist’ and a person who had fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, Germans had put a 10,000-guilder reward on his head. But Last wanted to continue his fight against fascism – now embodied in the German occupiers and their Dutch collaborators. Two efforts stand out as particularly important. Firstly, Last helped found *Levensrecht* (Right to life), the first magazine in the Netherlands by and for homosexuals who wanted to fight fascism and the oppression of homosexuals. He and his colleagues were forced to shred the fourth issue and throw it in the canal, however, because with the ‘Ordinance to Combat Counternatural Fornication’, Reich commissioner for the German-occupied Netherlands Arthur Seyss-Inquart had criminalised all homosexual behaviour (between men).<sup>58</sup> And secondly, in January 1941, Last became editor of the underground publication *De Vonk*, which is considered to be one of the most important resistance newspapers during the Second World War. Last worked under many pseudonyms, from Cornelis Sterk and Dr Helleman to Carel Frederiks. His work included the distribution of *De Vonk* throughout the Netherlands, the forging of ration cards, and assistance for Jews and other persecuted individuals in hiding. It’s a miracle he was never

caught. When others were arrested, he happened to be elsewhere. If he accidentally bumped into a German, he bluffed his way through speaking perfect German. And everywhere he had friends with whom he took shelter.

In his idle hours, he wrote the (unpublished) *Dagboek van een veroordeelde* (Diary of a convict), as he thought he might be arrested at any moment. In this work, Last impresses with a stunning mastery and analysis of philosophers and writers such as Spinoza, Erasmus, Levinas, Nietzsche, Rilke and Goethe. This is how he prepared for death. Yet he also continued to think about the future of socialism; he wrote 'Love is the deepest motive of socialism'. He concluded that for a better society after the war, a religious revival, a religious socialism was needed.<sup>59</sup> While it was never published, this diary should be considered one of Last's most important works. It was the first work by a truly autonomous writer, a free-thinking man. This development had begun when he left the Communist Party in 1938 and the war completed that process.

In February or March 1945, Last joined Ter Haar in Ommen, Overijssel, where he became commander of the *Binnenlandse Strijdkrachten* (Domestic Forces, or BS). Ommen was liberated by the Polish and Canadian armies soon after, on 11 April 1945, and thus Last became a free man again. It would take another 77 years before he'd be officially recognised for his role during the Second World War.

Last and Ter Haar remarried on 9 May 1946. Their daughter Femke was their witness. Last wrote the following in his memoirs about this decision:

There was no reason not to undo the separation that had been forced upon us. The children were now old enough to help make decisions, and no doubt no longer ignorant of my sexual deviation. But they realised that we were connected by something stronger than sexual feelings. And so a few weeks later, in front of a town hall full of friends, that remarkable second marriage took place, in which the civil registrar asked the first witness: 'Are you related to one of the two appearing?' 'Indeed, I am their daughter'.<sup>60</sup>

For Jef, the second marriage was a 'logical step'; Ter Haar, however, had other reasons. Femke later said that her mother's reasons for remarrying were mostly financial and business in nature. She deemed her parents' choice to remarry 'very stupid'. Ter Haar knew her husband was gay, but was never able to fully accept his sexuality, according to Last's secretary, Wim 't Hart: 'she just couldn't handle it emotionally. And that clashed because Jef was a very intense person'.<sup>61</sup>

## An advocate for homosexual rights

Issue 4 of *Levensrecht* was finally published in 1946. Still cautiously, writing under a pseudonym, Last contributed many articles to the magazine, and to its successor, *Vriendschap*. Besides his writing, Last made further contributions to gay emancipation in the Netherlands: on 7 December 1946 he co-initiated the founding of the *Shakespeareclub* (because of his sonnets, Shakespeare had a homosexual reputation among gay intellectuals), which was renamed *Cultuur en Ontspannings Centrum* (Centre for Culture and Leisure or COC) in February 1949. The COC and its predecessor were in the vanguard of gay liberation and offered a safe space where members of the Dutch LGBT community could talk freely about sexuality for the first time in their lives.<sup>62</sup> However, this slightly greater visibility of LGBT people was not without its drawbacks: they were constantly monitored by the police. This didn't deter Last, who was a staunch believer in sexual freedom and had a very active sex life.

It is important to note that the fact that *Levensrecht* was back in print did not mean that homosexuality was now tolerated in the Netherlands. Prosecutor Wassenberg's letter about the *Shakespeareclub* is telling in this respect: 'Homosexual intercourse works like an oil slick. It should not be forgotten that it leads to unbelievable perversities, which can give rise to lustful murders'.<sup>63</sup> It never actually came to a charge of 'lust murder', but on 10 May 1950 an official report was drawn up against Last for 'committing lewd acts with a minor of the same sex' in his cottage in Ouderkerk aan de Amstel just outside of Amsterdam. Last, who had already left to take on a new role in Indonesia (see below), was unaware

of these charges. But when he returned to the Netherlands three years later, on 9 December 1953, he was immediately apprehended by the state police. He was arrested under section 284bis of the Penal Code, discussed earlier.<sup>64</sup> According to statements of five young men aged between 17 and 24, Last had accosted them and made them pose for him at his house. Last admitted that he often made drawings of boys, but argued that they had come to him, and that he hadn't lured them to his house as these five young men had stated.<sup>65</sup> He nevertheless was strongly affected by the charges, and attempted suicide in his cell. He felt he had come back to 'a country where such a charge was a disgrace, not only to myself but to my wife, my children, and to the workers who had relied on me'. He did not want to become fodder for reporters, interviewers and sensationalism: 'I simply didn't feel like living anymore'.<sup>66</sup> The next day, Last was released on a bail of 3,000 guilders. He got off with a warning, but decided that it would be better from now on to keep a low profile sexually.<sup>67</sup>

### From novels to non-fiction and Eastern philosophy

In the field of literature, Last had to endure a lot of setbacks. His work *Een socialistische renaissance* (A socialist renaissance), published in 1945, wasn't mentioned anywhere, something that grieved him greatly because the book set out the new and – in his eyes – sensible theories he had developed about how socialism could work in the post-war Netherlands. He advocated for a new strain of socialism which he called '*mensheid-socialisme*' (humanity-socialism), as opposed to the partisan socialism he no longer wanted to be part of.<sup>68</sup> In *De Vlam*, the successor to *De Vonk*, he also argued for the abolition of the mass production of food and goods. But his ideas, which were remarkably ahead of their time, fell on deaf ears. After such a devastating war, the Dutch weren't interested in idealism or joining a movement; they just wanted to keep their heads down and rebuild the country. A gloomy Last felt stuck and misunderstood. For the bourgeoisie, he was nothing more than a communist, while communists saw him as a deserter and a coward.<sup>69</sup>

To his great joy and relief, Last was offered a way out when, in 1950, he received an invitation from his friend Mohammed Hatta, Vice

President of Indonesia, to write articles for European readers about the new Indonesia. Indonesia had declared itself an independent republic in 1945, but the Dutch government, in an effort to restore control over their former colony, had waged a violent military campaign against the Republic of Indonesia during its struggle for independence in the Indonesian National Revolution, between 1945 and 1950. Most of the Dutch were thus no longer welcome there. Last was a different story, however. He had been a vocal advocate for Indonesian independence since the 1920s and now gladly accepted his friend's invitation. He became a teacher in Bali and made friends with President Sukarno, among others. Several trips followed and for months he travelled through Asia. He had found a new purpose: from now on he would write mainly non-fiction books about countries of the East (Japan, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan) and Eastern philosophy.<sup>70</sup> Confucius became his guide for life. At the age of sixty, in 1958, he obtained his doctorate in Hamburg, with a thesis written in German about the Chinese philosopher and writer Lu Hsun.<sup>71</sup>

China, a colossal country now controlled by Mao and his Little Red Book, continued to occupy Last's mind. Ever since embarking on his study of Chinese language and culture in 1918 he had wanted to visit the country, but his visa applications had always previously been denied. Finally, in October 1963, his wish was granted. The Dutch newspaper *Het Parool*, which was particularly interested in communist China and its influences on the rest of the Asian world, sent him on assignment to Asia.<sup>72</sup> In the People's Republic, Last noted, 'nothing has come of the great promises. One wanted to take a big leap forward and it ended up being two leaps backwards'. Last had not wanted to be disappointed in this way: 'These are bitter words, which I truly do not write for my pleasure'.<sup>73</sup> From then on, he closely followed developments in China. He took particular pains to compare official reports from the People's Republic with historical sources, and with reports from foreign China experts. This resulted in an impressive series of smaller booklets and articles, as well as the in-depth studies *China: Land van de eeuwige omwenteling* (1965) and *Vuurwerk achter de Chinese muur* (1970). During the period between the publication of these two books, Mao launched his Cultural Revolution. Last wrote of this sociopolitical movement:

It is simply an attempt to return to the isolated China of the ancient emperors. The Great Wall of China has been completely rebuilt again. In China, people can no longer talk to anyone ... One no longer thinks. Only Mao still thinks. There is an inquisitorial terror.<sup>74</sup>

Here spoke a man who knew what he was talking about. But his was a voice in the desert: Last was one of the few who had the moral courage to be critical of the so-called blessings of the Cultural Revolution, unlike many Dutch intellectuals of the time.

In 1969, Last moved to a retirement home in Laren. His room there was next door to Ter Haar's, who had remained his beloved companion throughout all these years. In a letter dated 24 April 1971, he wrote to his daughter Ankie, who had moved to the United States, that he hoped they would see each other again. With a cry of triumph, doubly underlined, he wrote 'My work is finished!'. For most writers, 'My work is finished' would sound ominous, but for Last it was a glorious victory. Despite the physical and mental discomforts he suffered later in life, he had accomplished great feats and determinedly finished what he had set out to do.

He had made his will because colon cancer had begun to destroy his body. As euthanasia was not allowed at that time in the Netherlands, he decided to sit outside in the garden with a bare upper body, in the freezing cold. Immediately he got pneumonia. On 15 February 1972, he died. He was 73 years old. Ter Haar did not have to arrange a funeral, as Last had left his body to science.

## Remembering Last, a man of many identities

Japanese, Indonesian, German, Belgian and French newspapers, including *Le Monde*, reported the death of Last. In the Netherlands, laudatory in memoriams appeared in all possible media. His death, controversial as he himself may have been, was a national event. Characterisations of the writer, so difficult to classify, varied widely. *De Telegraaf* simply called him 'a versatile man', *De Gooi- and Eemlander* 'a



universal humanist' and the *Volkskrant* 'a left-wing globetrotter'.<sup>75</sup> Max Nord, in *Het Parool*, saw him mainly as a 'moralist': 'Moralists are not just people who expect something from life, but romantics who want to give meaning and purpose to it themselves. Such a person was Jef Last'. Nord described Last as a maverick in Dutch literature, 'someone who has often not been taken sufficiently seriously, someone who, I am convinced, has been underestimated'.<sup>76</sup> Long-time friend Piet Meertens wrote in *Elsevier* that Last had been a difficult man: 'A heretic by nature, not because he was querulant, but out of distress of conscience, because he was aware that every side has its flip side'. He also noted that a friendship with Last was always difficult, an endless source of annoyance and disappointment. But he also praised his greatness: 'The greatness of Last lies in his never-ending call to humanity, his love for humanity and compassion for its suffering'. And he also noted the fact that Last – 'resistance fighter of the first hour' – hadn't been publicly recognised for his efforts during the Second World War, an 'inexcusable' omission.<sup>77</sup>

What I find special about Last is that he was not afraid to change his mind if 'progressive insight' forced him to do so. This quality applied to him even when he was still a member of a political party. He stuck to what his conscience told him to do, and if the party took a course against it, he'd leave. This took courage, a lot of courage. And he showed the same courage when he fought in the Spanish Civil War, became deeply involved in the resistance, defended the self-determination of peoples under colonial rule, and stood up for the rights of homosexuals. He incorporated this sensibility into his novels, poems and articles. Not only was he a mirror of the times: he was also often ahead of his time. Yet in his lifelong quest for love and justice, he was timeless. In 2002, the Rotterdam City Council decided to name a street in the Nesseland district after Last. This would have pleased him greatly. After all, it was in Rotterdam where he had met Ter Haar.

So how is Last remembered today? What is his legacy? Almost all reviewers of my biography of Last commented that, within its pages, 'Jef Last was brought back to life'. There was a real 'Last revival', which continues to this day. No one really knew him anymore, as often happens with dead writers, but suddenly people recognised that he had been quite a 'phenomenon'. They were particularly impressed that someone

had done so much in a single lifetime, had so often gone against the prevailing political views of his time, and had turned out to be such a visionary: 'The life and thinking of Jef Last offers a wonderful entrance to the great issues of the twentieth century', wrote one reviewer.<sup>78</sup>

The *Gaykrant* devoted a lengthy article to the biography.<sup>79</sup> Even the *Stichting Spanje, 1936-1939* (Foundation Spain 1936-1939), which organises annual memorial meetings for Dutch fighters in the Spanish Civil War – an organisation for which Last, given its high number of (former) communist members, was a sensitive topic – praised 'this fascinating biography in which you are swept up in the life of perhaps one of the most versatile, but also one of the most complicated intellectuals the Netherlands has known'.<sup>80</sup> Only socialist-minded reviewers called him 'a left-wing nuisance' and 'a headache for those around him'.<sup>81</sup>

Last had many social identities and could not be placed in any box another reviewer noted:

You cannot speak of 'the life' of Jef Last, but of 'lives', plural, because he crammed many lives into the one he had. As a spirited activist ever and everywhere present, tirelessly developing countless initiatives, fighter in Spain, resistance fighter from the very beginning, gay emancipator, globetrotter and at the same time as a poet, writer, and translator, how could one man be so productive? Egocentrism and disregard for his family were important factors, but above all his irrepressible urge to contradict.<sup>82</sup>

On 20 August 2021, eight months after my book was first published, I was invited by the *Stichting Rose in Verzet* (Pink in Resistance Foundation), which is committed to LGBTQ emancipation, to unveil a portrait of Last by painter Herman Morssink at de Zóciëteit, a club for older gay men. The portrait is part of a series about 'pink resistance fighters' which includes portraits of Frieda Belinfante, Ru Paré and Nico Engelschman. At the gathering, people expressed disbelief that Last had not received an official award for his efforts during the Second World War.

Then, finally, on 11 April 2022, at Castle Eerde in Ommen, Last was posthumously awarded the *Draaginsigne* of the Binnenlandse Strijdkrachten (medal of the Dutch resistance) by a Royal Army general,

Arco Solkesz. A gay man himself, Solkesz told the gathering that he was deeply impressed with Last's life: 'He was a man who fought for justice'.<sup>83</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 *Bestaat er een raarder leven dan het mijne? Jef Last 1898-1972*, Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2021, is largely based on Jef Last's unpublished memoirs that are available at the Museum of Dutch Literature in Den Haag upon consent of the Last family; interviews with his friends, and family (including his three daughters), which were conducted between 1986 when I embarked on this project and 2016; his correspondence; archival research; and his more than 100 novels, poetry bundles, song collections, plays, historical non-fiction works and translations.
- 2 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag: Museum of Dutch Literature.
- 3 *Virtus Concordia Fides*, 7 October 1918.
- 4 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag.
- 5 Bart van der Steen, 'Met de Roode Auto op reis. Inleiding bij een fragment uit de memoires van Jef Last', in *Onvoltooid Verleden*, Vol 23, 2007, pp7-27.
- 6 The idea behind this title, which translates into 'Songs on the rhythm of the rotan', was that one could sing the songs to the rhythm of the caning of Indonesians. See: Jef Last, *Liedjes op maat van de rottan: Indische revolutionaire gedichten*, Collected, introduced, and explained by Harry A. Poeze, Leiden: KITLV, 1994.

- 7 For more information on the SDAP's colonial politics: Erik Hansen, 'Marxists and Imperialism: The Indonesian Policy of the Dutch Social Democratic Workers Party, 1894-1914', in *Indonesia*, Vol 16, 1973, pp81-104; and J.A.A. van Doorn, 'De sociaal-democratie en het koloniale vraagstuk', in *Socialisme & Democratie*, Vol 11, 1999, pp484-492.
- 8 Jef Last, *Marianne*, Amsterdam: Servire/De Baanbreker, 1930.
- 9 Jacqueline Bel, *Bloed en rozen. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1900-1945*, Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2015.
- 10 Bart van der Steen, *Henk Sneevliet, Leider van de Revolutionair Socialistische Partij (1929-1934). Hoe hij zijn leiderschap vorm gaf*, unpublished thesis, Leiden 2006.
- 11 *De Baanbreker*, 29 March 1930.
- 12 Letter from Last to Sneevliet dated 23 February 1930.
- 13 Van der Steen, *Henk Sneevliet*.
- 14 Communist Party leader Louis de Visser wrote, for example, 'With his serious intentions and knowledge of Marxism, he could certainly work his way up to become a useful propagandist of communism'. This letter is published in: Nieko van de Pavert, *Jef Last tussen de partij en zichzelf*, Amsterdam: De Witte Studentenpers, 1982.
- 15 Last's letters from Moscow are available at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam.
- 16 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag.
- 17 Jef Last, *Het stalen fundament. Reportage over 2500 k.m. zwerftochten door de Oerol*, Amsterdam: Boekengemeenschap der Vrienden van de Sowjet-Unie, 1933.
- 18 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag.
- 19 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag.
- 20 Jef Last, *Zuiderzee*, Amsterdam: Querido, 1934.
- 21 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag.
- 22 Hans Goedkoop, 'Vogelvrij worden; Jef Last in de Spaanse Burgeroorlog', in *Homologie*, Vol 8 No 6, October/November 1986.
- 23 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag.
- 24 Maxim Gorky made this statement immediately after the Dutch worker and leftist activist Marinus van der Lubbe was accused of burning down the Reichstag in Berlin. The Soviet communist party believed Van der Lubbe was gay and a collaborator with the brownshirts, the Sturmabteilung, whose leader was openly gay man Ernst Röhm.
- 25 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Wester, *Bestaat er een raarder leven dan het mijne?*, p182.

- 28 Thomas von Vegesack, *De Intellectuelen. Een geschiedenis van het literair engagement 1898-1968*, Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1989. See also: Herbert Lottman, *The Left Bank*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- 29 Claude Mauriac, *Conversations avec André Gide*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1951.
- 30 André Gide, *Correspondance avec Jef Last 1935-1950*, Edition établie, présentée et annotée par C.J. Greshoff, Presses Universitaires de Lyon 1985.
- 31 Jef Last, *Mijn vriend André Gide*, Amsterdam: Van Ditmar, 1966, p71.
- 32 Maria van Rysselberghe, *Les Cahiers de la Petite Dame*, Paris: Gallimard, 1973-1977.
- 33 Jef Last's report of this trip through the Soviet Union isn't part of his memoirs, but is part of his book *Mijn vriend André Gide*, which was published in 1966. He himself acknowledged the unreliability of some of the 'facts' he presents in this work. He cites a diary he supposedly kept in 1936, but it is unclear how he added entries during his trip. Both Gide and Last stopped keeping notes once they caught Bola going through Gide's paper bin.
- 34 Last, *Mijn vriend André Gide*, p112.
- 35 Ibid, p129.
- 36 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 8 October 1960.
- 37 Letter to Gide dated 29 August 1936.
- 38 Jef Last, *Over de Hollanders in Spanje*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact 1938, pp18-19.
- 39 Lucas van Oppen, *Last: Author, Activist, Outcast*, unpublished thesis, University of Leiden 2020.
- 40 Jef Last, *De Spaanse tragedie*, Amsterdam: Contact, 1938, p42.
- 41 Jef Last, *In de loopgraven voor Madrid*, 2nd series of letters, Amsterdam: Contact 1938, p18.
- 42 Last, *De Spaanse tragedie*, p124.
- 43 Jef Last, *Madrid strijdt verder*, 3rd series of letters, Amsterdam: Contact 1937, p12.
- 44 About 600 Dutch volunteers joined the International Brigades in spite of the fact that they – and their spouses and children – lost their Dutch citizenship by fighting for a foreign state, as stipulated in the Dutch Nationality Law.
- 45 Last, *Madrid strijd verder*, p31.
- 46 Copy from Comintern archive in Moscow.
- 47 Gide, *Correspondance*, p421.

- 48 *Sarpsborg Arbeiderblad*, 1937. Sent to author in English language by Norwegian historian Runar Jordån.
- 49 Copy of subpoena given to the author by Wim 't Hart.
- 50 Copies of the granting of guardianship and citizenship to Ida given to the author by Wim 't Hart.
- 51 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag.
- 52 *Het Volksdagblad*, 'Een deserteur. Verklaring van 't secretariaat der CPN over Jef Last', 2 March 1938, p1.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Letter from Jef Last to Pierre Dubois dated 20 May 1953.
- 55 Last, *De Spaanse tragedie*, p198
- 56 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag.
- 57 Reconstructing Last's life during the Second World War was difficult due to a lack of documents. There are hardly any letters from this period: too dangerous for himself and the people to whom he wrote. Moreover, he was unreachable because he kept changing his address. I cannot draw from his memoirs either because they are incomplete or confused, something which he himself later also admitted. For this period, I mainly had to rely on personal testimonies of people with whom he was in hiding or worked with in the resistance. His daughters, Femke and Ankie, who were both members of the resistance (Femke was arrested and deported, yet survived the camps), were also able to fill the gaps.
- 58 Pieter Koenders, *Homoseksualiteit in bezet Nederland. Een verzwegen hoofdstuk*, Den Haag: SUA-Woelrat, 1984, p86.
- 59 Jef Last, *Dagboek van een veroordeelde*, unpublished, Den Haag: Museum of Dutch Literature.
- 60 Unpublished memoirs, Den Haag.
- 61 Conversation with Wim 't Hart, 20 November 1985.
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