The Marshall Plan: “A Short Time to Change the World”

Linda Christenson and Eric Christenson

Forty-five years after the European Recovery Program commenced, research began with interviews in the U.S. and Europe in order to provide historical context for the PBS documentary, *The Marshall Plan: Against the Odds* (1997). It was the first film to emphasize the crucial role of Europeans themselves in the ultimate success of the innovative American initiative. On its premiere, the *Washington Post* called it an “important hour-long film” which achieved “[the] impossible by making the Marshall Plan not only understandable but fascinating—as important and engaging a history lesson as you’re likely to get this year.” Professor Ernst van der Beugel, a key player during the period, remembered those four years: “It was a short time to change the world.”

In the early 1990s, with the assistance of embassies in Washington, DC—particularly the embassies of Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and Norway—Project Director (and Researcher) Linda Christenson was able to find potential interviewees in Europe and the United States and to conduct preliminary telephone interviews for a proposed PBS documentary on the Marshall Plan. She looked for people who worked in some capacity for the Marshall Plan, people whose lives were directly or indirectly affected by the Marshall Plan, people who could provide expert and scholarly insights into the Marshall Plan experience, and ordinary people who could tell their personal stories when their world was rapidly changing—politically, culturally, and economically. The transcriptions of those telephone interviews formed the basis for follow-up questions during video-taped interviews by Linda and her husband, Eric, in the U.S. and Western Europe and—during the production phase—a two-week trip with the documentary’s producer and film crew to Austria, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Of the nine Dutch interviewees, two became essential to the finished documentary.

One of these two was economist Ernst van der Beugel, a representative of the Netherlands to the first meeting of the newly formed Committee of European Economic Cooperation (CEECE) in Paris in July 1947. Established to produce—in just a few weeks—a joint request to the U.S. Congress for economic aid in response to the challenge posed by Secretary of State George C. Marshall the previous month, the CEECE provided a forum for the grueling but necessary

negotiations among representatives from all of the Western European countries except Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Spain. In his interview, van der Beugel describes some of the problems of governmental incompetence, cheating, and inflation of needs during negotiations, but also the inspiring solutions reached in the end. He was part of the group that came to the U.S. the following October to present the joint request to Congress.

After Congress finally passed enabling legislation for the European Recovery Program—*aka* the “Marshall Plan”—in April 1948, van der Beugel became an active participant in the subsequent Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), witnessing the continuing struggles of the Western European representatives to work together. In his interview, he candidly addresses his personal problem of loyalty—of being both a Dutch national and a European—and having to represent one or the other as the situation demanded. Ivo Blom, the other Dutch interviewee featured in the documentary, is not represented in this paper. But as a lifelong resident of Rotterdam, he sets up the drama for the program as he describes the terrible physical conditions in the Netherlands at war’s end and the desperate need for economic aid, especially for the city’s harbor, where he worked when he was interviewed.

Two other Dutchmen, the Honorable J.R.M. van den Brink and Gerrit Staarman, did not make the final cut for the documentary, but their insights and experiences greatly informed the documentary. For this paper their interviews are necessary for understanding the Marshall Plan experience and the cultural changes arising from it in Western Europe in general and in the Netherlands in particular. Van den Brink was Minister of Economic Affairs of the Netherlands, 1948–1952, and as such responsible for the entirety of the Marshall Plan. He talked of the difficulties of convincing a conservative postwar Dutch government of the value of taking advantage of the ERP and accepting its promotion of liberalized trade, productivity, and economic integration. Prescient and wise beyond his years, he led the Dutch economy in a brave and potentially dangerous direction against the conventional wisdom of others in the government. A young farmer during the period, Staarman came to the U.S. in 1950 for a nine-month stay under the auspices of the ECA, and continued to be a spokesman for the Marshall Plan at his farm on one of the new polders. His barns and fields eventually became known as a model farm and a tourist destination. And his story is emblematic of both the extent and the limits of American influence and allure during the period.

Taken together, these three interviews highlight Dutch-American connections, moments of cultural change, confrontation, and the function of the Marshall Plan. For the purposes of this paper, the quotations are taken out of

the context of their free-flowing and unrehearsed interviews; they are edited to make passages smoother and without unnecessary interruptions.¹

Emailed inquiries regarding specific interviewees and their roles and experiences during this most lively period of cultural interchanges and dialogue are welcome.² *The Marshall Plan From Those Who Made It Succeed*, a collection of "Personal Retrospectives of Marshall Plan Participants," may also be of interest to scholars.³ Generated primarily from events at the commemorative conference at George Washington University held 2 June 1997, it includes conference proceedings, papers, and narrative memoirs of participants in the Marshall Plan. Researchers and scholars may also be interested in the extensive collection of Marshall Plan photographs in the National Archives II on the campus of the University of Maryland. The copies of the photos printed here are only reference contact prints, all of which have suffered damage from the tape that secured them to old negative envelopes. (The undamaged negatives, from which prints may be ordered from Archives II, are now secured in cold storage.) Made by European photographers on contract to the ERP, the photos allow scholars to step into this exciting and dynamic period.

The photographs and transcribed interviews open a window onto the experiences of the men and women who lived through the Marshall Plan years and those who helped to shape it. In the Netherlands and other Marshall Plan-participant countries, new ideas and new machines, along with old-fashioned and disciplined hard work, transformed the world for government officials, factory workers, farmers, housewives—in fact, for just about everyone.

**Prof. Dr. Ernst van der Beugel, representative of the Netherlands
on the Committee of European Economic Cooperation (CEEC)**

Ernst van der Beugel was secretary of the Dutch delegation at the July 1947 Western European conference on the Marshall Plan in Paris. The year before, he had joined the Dutch Ministry of Economic affairs. His 1966 Ph.D. dissertation was *From Marshall Plan to Atlantic Partnership*.

-
- 1 Because of this editing, they should not be quoted or relied upon for scholarly research. The full and corrected transcriptions may be ordered for a nominal fee directly from the sole owners, Linda and Eric Christenson, Christenson Associates, 514 East New Jersey Avenue, #5116, Southern Pines, North Carolina 28387, USA.
 - 2 Interested researchers may request an annotated list of interviewees, both European and American, at elc@earthlink.net or by phone 1-703-362-5447 or 1-910-692-0468.
 - 3 It is available online at abebooks.com and amazon.com.

In the interview he recalled: “1947–48 was a very bad winter. So the feeling was... we were at the point where if there would not happen something from outside, we would have been obliged to cut imports and to go ‘down’ again. So that was an enormous political problem and economic problem—also a domestic political problem, because if I only mentioned the percentage of Communist votes in Italy and France—it was rather worrisome that if nothing would happen in the field of keeping up the recovery, politically it would have been a very delicate—to say the least—*delicate* situation. Belgium was liberated one *year* before Holland, and the last year in Holland was the worst year. Everything was destroyed, and there was *real, real* hunger in Holland.”

Van der Beugel recalls the drama of the Paris conference: “The program of the conference was to establish what the need of dollar imports was for the different participating countries. That was done by so-called ‘questionnaires’ which had to be filled in by the different governments, and then the questionnaires came back to Paris, and then there were groups who studied those questionnaires in order to establish what would be the total need of dollars in that part of Europe for the first four years.”

“The main problem was that practically for every country, the amount of dollars was *the* principal economic question in all those countries. And it is of course natural that everybody tried to inflate the figures. When the questionnaire asked, ‘How much is your need of coal for four years from now?’ who the hell is going to check that? So everybody *inflated* the figures. So there was a kind of examination: Every country had to appear before a group of four people from the conference [who] withdrew to one of the small places outside Paris in order to find the solution to bring the total to acceptable levels. They had to defend their figures, which was, as an exercise of international cooperation, of course, *completely* new!”

“I think it was one of the main elements of the Marshall Plan and one of the main successes of the Marshall Plan. The unique thing of the Marshall Plan is that it was not only unprecedented in scope and in idea and in concept, but it was unprecedented in its success. It was completely successful! It was the only great exercise in foreign policy that was crowned by complete success.”

“The main point was of *loyalty*. The primary loyalty of these people went to their own country and to their own dollars. But it is absolutely certain in my mind that this other element of the cooperative effort was also an element in the policy of most. They realized that the relation with the United States and the possibility that Marshall aid would be not for one year, but for four years, was closely linked by the efforts to work together.”

"[At the Conference] the pressure was time. The pressures on the division of aid were, of course, very, very, very great. It was a short time to change the world. And it was *tough* work. It was tough! It was a very, very hot summer! There was no air conditioning in the Petit Palais, where we met, and we started at 8 o'clock in the morning and went on to ten o'clock in the evening in a *terrible* heat. But it was inspiring!"

"There were many problems. In the first place, most—at least half—of the administrations of the government machines in many countries were not geared to make this kind of prognosis, so they didn't know how to handle it and therefore cheated even more than the people who had the machinery, who cheated also. And that was the main problem."

"One evening, we had dinner with the Greek minister—or representative—Mr. Verdelis—a very nice man—who had this suite in the most expensive hotel in Paris—in the Ritz. It's always the poorest countries who live in the nicest hotels. And when we entered his dining room, we walked through where there were literally *thousands* of questionnaires lying on the floor and tables and everywhere. And we said, 'But Verdelis, these questionnaires should have been sent to Athens six weeks ago!' And he said, 'Yes, I know, but listen: in Athens, nobody knows *anything*. So I know perhaps a little more than they know in Athens, so I sit after dinner every night and fill in the questionnaires.' So that was one of the signals that not everything was completely correct."

And on the Dutch side, "There was one conversation I remember. I think in the third year, Congress cut the total amount of Marshall aid [by] 10%. I remember I accompanied our Foreign Minister on a visit to Harriman in order to get the 10% back.... I would say that Harriman was very nice; he had explained to us that it was absolutely impossible.... When we drove to the Hotel Talleyrand, where Harriman had his head office, the Dutch Foreign Minister said to me, 'I am going to feel unwell. I will warn you, but when we are with Harriman, I'm going to feel unwell.' So we entered the room of Harriman. The Foreign Minister explained that it would be an absolute disaster if we missed this 10%. He couldn't say that we would go Communist—because we had no Communists—but it was a *dramatic* thing. And at a certain moment, he said, 'Ambassador, I don't feel very well. Would you mind that I lie down for a moment?' And he lies down on a couch. Harriman came with brandy and with eau de cologne and with everything else, and so he recovered, and five million dollars! And we had not left the building before the minister said to me, sitting in the car, he said, 'It worked! It worked!' So that was something I remember very well!"

"Now this cooperation part of the Plan was not completely successful because the British and a few other countries, mainly in Scandinavia, refused to link up their fate with the continent of Europe. That's an old problem. I always have

difficulty in knowing exactly what ‘feeling European’ means. I always answer the question that if ‘feeling European’ would mean something different from America, I always told people that my affinity with the average farmer in Kansas is greater than my affinity with the average farmer in Sicily. So in that respect, ‘feeling European’ is ... relative.”

When Van der Beugel went to Washington to meet with Congressional committees, he said that he was “purely European! There, without any doubt, the accent was *completely* on the European approach!”

“NATO would not have been possible if there would not have been a minimum of economic and financial stability and recovery, and that came from the Marshall Plan. So I think that also NATO is in some way a child of the Marshall

FIGURE 1 *“I’m absolutely certain that the European Common Market and the Coal and Steel Community are direct children of the Marshall Plan!”— Ernst van der Beugel.*
ALL PHOTOS FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AT COLLEGE PARK, MD.

FIGURE 2 "EUROPE—ALL OUR COLOURS TO THE MAST," by Reijn Dirksen, the Netherlands. This was the First Prize winner of the 1950 Marshall Plan poster competition promoting the theme of "International cooperation for a better standard of living." More than 10,000 Western European artists submitted designs to the competition.

Plan. I'm *absolutely* certain that the European Common Market and the Coal and Steel Community are *direct* children of the Marshall Plan. That kind of cooperation would not have been possible without a major restoration of economic and social viability."

FIGURE 3 *An early 1950s window display featuring photos of a typical American family; scenes illustrating American culture draw attention from passers-by in The Hague.*

The Honorable J.R.M. van den Brink, Minister of Economic Affairs 1948–52

Born in 1915, Jan van den Brink was appointed Minister of Economic Affairs in January 1948 and immediately had to argue his position in the Dutch cabinet. “We had quite a row. I got into quite an argument with my colleague in finance, who said, ‘We can’t go on this way: We have to bring down investment levels. We have to bring down levels of consumption. And we have to continue [in the same way].’ Because we had at that time still a central, guided “scarcity” economy—as we had in the war—so the entrepreneurs could not really take initiatives. Everything was rationed and distributed, and we had central bureaus for everything—for leather and for textiles and for wood and metals, and so on. Everything was regulated. Every import had to be licensed and every export had to be granted, and so on. And so it was terrible red tape! We had, I think, two hundred and fifty thousand civil servants more at that time than before the war. And we had [fewer] people available for work in the business also at that time.”

“And in my opinion—I was then 32, and I am *still* the youngest cabinet minister we ever had in Holland—I was 32 only—and [I was] there to take certain risks! I defended another position. I said we have to go on the level we have now, because of that speech of Marshall. I think the Americans will be wise enough, also in their own interests, to make it so that we can go on to build up the country and be good clients in the future. And so my thesis was [that] this foreign aid, it will come, and we will get quite a part of it, or our economy will really fall down, and then recovery is a little bit later than it would have happened otherwise. And so I wanted to take the risk, and I succeeded in convincing my colleagues, and we continued and Marshall help came.”

“Marshall aid was surely not the most important thing in Holland. The most important [thing] at that time was, in fact, the consensus and the discipline of the population. I had very close relations with organizations of the entrepreneurs, but also of labor. And so we had, at a very early stage already, the constructive cooperation between the parties in business, and that was the real strength of Holland just after the war.”

“On the whole, I think it was handled in a very businesslike way and with also some idealism. It was four per cent of our national income at that time.

FIGURE 4 *The Hon. J.R.M. (Jan) van den Brink, Minister of Economic Affairs, The Netherlands, 1948–1952.*

FIGURE 5 AND 6 *A new Marshall Plan-funded factory in Uden.*

That would be today [April 20, 1995]—in prices of today—a national income of today—let me say, 80–100 billion. That's a lot of money. It just made it possible to invest in a speed you needed to liberalize the economy and to restore the market in due time."

“And the Marshall help was accompanied by, let me say, the incentive to construct an OEEC [The Organization for European Economic Co-operation]. And that was, for a country like the Netherlands, very important because this country is condemned to death if trade is not free enough. We have lived for centuries from trade. You have seen that at Rotterdam and Amsterdam. And we were very much in favor of this development in Europe also leading to European integration. So Marshall aid was fitting in a total atmosphere in Europe, and especially in this country, that we wanted to do things in a more rational, wiser, and better way, you know—and together!”

“The Marshall aid was, in my opinion, a more modern view on the problems in a rational way, without rancor, and without negative feelings as to the former enemy. You know, it was very different. And that feeling was rather more widespread since then, but I do not know if you have seen yesterday the football match in Amsterdam on television between the Netherlands and Germany; that’s very special for us, to fight—there in the stadium—the Germans. You see it. There is still something there very far back in their minds of that feeling from the wartime.”

FIGURE 7 *Indicators of cultural change and industrial growth are in evidence. Modern machinery such as these Singer sewing machines creates both new products and employment while reducing prices at this “ready-made” clothing factory in The Hague.*

The small Dutch farm town of Uden has assured itself of a stable economic future by industrializing. With a surplus labor force on its hands and no local opportunity for employment, the municipal council in 1948 decided to make Uden a small industrial center. This rural industrialization was achieved in a unique manner. Standardized workshops were built at municipal expense. They can be leased or bought on easy terms and already have attracted eight manufacturers employing 800 workers. All utilities are available, thanks to the town's initiative, and roads have been hard-surfaced and illuminated. The spirit of Uden was essential for the success of the Netherlands' five-year industrialization program, the goal of which was a balance in national spending and production along with full employment by 1953—security and prosperity without foreign assistance.

Gerrit Staarman, Farmer

Born in 1920 on a farm 15 kilometers from the German border, Gerrit Staarman said that his father "grew potatoes for export to France [and that] a lot of people worked on the farm. They had to do everything by hand, no tractors, no machinery, only horses. The horses did everything—plowing and cultivating and bringing the potatoes to the surface, with workers on their knees digging them out and throwing them in the baskets. So you can understand that was a lot of work."

"I was sent to elementary school. And then we had to work on the fields. But my father sent me to the high school for four years. I learned German, English, French, and geography. And then he sent me to the agriculture school three years. I learned all about cows, about horses, about potatoes, about grain, everything. And then came the War. And everything went in."

"In 1945, there was no food in the big cities, especially the western part of Holland. But in the part where we lived, there were no problems. We had food enough! In April 1945 we were liberated! No bombers, no fighters, no Germans. End of the war!"

"We had three horses in the war, and after the war we had three horses—the same—and no machines. And we still had a little tractor. We couldn't buy a new tractor or new machinery. After the War came advertising in the newspaper: New jeeps from the United States! My father said, 'We can buy a jeep!' We could drive everywhere in our neighborhood. There was nobody who had a car in our town. We could work with the jeep in the fields and see something of the world around us. We used the jeep for everything, on the roads, on the land, cultivating, plowing, mowing grass, and everything. After about 1950, I think, we got combines from the United States ... and then a lot of tractors came."

"In 1948, I'd like to go somewhere in the world! My father always talked about the United States. We saw in an agriculture newspaper something about the Marshall Plan, and I wrote a letter about our farm and family. So I was one of fifty young farmers who went to the United States! We knew a little bit of the Marshall Plan, but not much. There were two who went to the United States from this province. I was one. I am very proud of it."

Gerrit Staarman sailed with other young Dutch farmers to America and landed in Halifax, where they unsuccessfully tried to buy postage stamps with their guilders. "When we went to the bank, we asked can we get dollars for the guilders? No. No! They don't want Guilders. So we got some stamps for nothing from those friendly people. But the Dutch money, it bought nothing." And then they were put on a train for Bangor, Maine, where they were to learn about farm machinery.

"We knew there was a lot of machinery. We didn't have machinery. We had the war and we didn't have machinery. We had just a little tractor but the most farmers had nothing—only horses and an old plow. And so we saw everything and everything was new! In the United States, the first things we saw were all the big cars! All those cars! Studebakers and Cadillacs and we never saw so many. The people were very friendly, different than in Holland. In Holland, you see somebody with money and he is very 'high.' The first day I came in the kitchen of the farmhouse, we saw electric machines everywhere! In the barn, there were other machines. In Holland it was all done by hand, but in the United States, with machines. I came in the farmhouse and sat in the chair and said, 'What is this?' 'What is a washing machine?' We never saw a washing machine before! The freezer was ... We didn't know *what* it was! Refrigerator! And a separator for the milk! All those machines! We had nothing like that in Holland!"

Later, on a farm in Pennsylvania, Staarman discovered that even there a lot of the work was done by hand, and he was pleased to learn that "our soil is better in Holland than in the U.S., I think. See, in the United States you had a lot of stones, and we didn't have that. So I like the soil in Holland."

Back in Holland, he remembers: "Well, I had been in the States, I knew what a washing machine was. So we were married and I said to my wife, 'We should buy a washing machine that is a good one.' And I bought a washing machine. And I put it in the kitchen. And then the whole family—twenty, thirty people came looking at the washing machine like it was a television. 'What is it doing now?' 'What is it doing now?' They didn't know what a refrigerator was. They knew nothing."

"On the farm my father said, 'We'll go to the United States. We will sell the farm and we go to the United States!' But we didn't do it. We stayed in Holland."

My father always said, 'The best soil is in the new polder. We don't go to the States, but then *you* start [being the farmer here]. We will go to the new polder!' And we got one of the best farms on the new polder!"

"My father became rich. He had a jeep and a little tractor. And after 1950, every year there came more machinery like in the United States, and every year fewer people [were] working in the farm because of all of the machinery!"

Staarman kept a diary of his American trip and included his impressions on an August [1950] afternoon: "At three o'clock I work a piece of land with a disc harrow. Afterwards I take a look at the tools in the barn. The equipment those Americans have! Lateral feeder rake, hay rake, hay baler, a mower driven by a tractor with a branch axle, combine harvester with auxiliary engine, corn planter,

FIGURE 8 *Some of the Dutch farmers on their return to the Netherlands from America, 1950, after spending several months working with American farmers and learning about agricultural mechanization. Gerrit Staarman is toward the back on the far left.*

FIGURE 9 *Willem Plasier of Zwijndrecht is shown by his American host, Edward W. Newlin of Grantville, PA, how to operate a self-propelled combine.*

FIGURE 10 *Newly arrived tractors from the U.S. sent to help speed up productivity and modernization in the Netherlands.*

corn harvester, fertilizer distributor, potato planter, potato harvester, huge potato sorting machine equipped with sorting table, potato sprayer, sprinkler, conveyor to get the bales up in the barn, grain mixer, grinder, cleaner, two big plows for the tractor, one disc harrow, one cultivator, two trailing cultivators, two John Deere tractors, one binder, electrical fuel pump, dung distributor, two milking machines, automated cooling installations for milk, water heater, automated drinking water supply for the cows and one truck. And all that on a 45-hectare farm!"

More than seven decades after the official end of the Marshall Plan, its name has entered the lexicon as a synonym for any necessary and clever cure for a troubled country, region, or people. It was, in fact, not a plan, but an evolving program during which the United States provided most of the financial support and Europeans provided the ideas for reconstructing, modernizing, and building what has become a family of nations in place of the warring states of their past. Much of the credit for the success of the program goes to the Americans who worked for it in Washington and Europe and to the Europeans who, like Ernst van der Beugel and Jan van den Brink, labored through the complex negotiations and who, like Gerrit Staarman, the Dutch farmer, worked to take advantage of the changing world. Its influence is still present and remains a subject worthy of study and historical research.

Bibliography

- Beugel, Ernst H. van der. 1997. Interview by Eric Christenson and Ira Klugerman. BETACAM. Den Haag, The Netherlands, 8 February.
- Brink, J.R.M van den. 1995. Interview by Linda Christenson and Eric Christenson. Video Tape. Hollandse Rading, The Netherlands, 20 April.
- The Marshall Plan: Against the Odds*. 1997. Educational Film Center and Christenson Associates. PBS. DVD.
- Menges, Constantine C., (ed.). 1999. *The Marshall Plan From Those Who Made It Succeed*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc..
- Staarman, Gerrit. 1996. Interviews by Linda Christenson, Eric Christenson, and Ira Klugerman. Video Tape. Swifterbant, The Netherlands, 23 November.