

Monthly Letter September 2009

The adventures of a truant: "I was imprisoned again"



September: a lot of enthusiastic students have returned to school, curious about the new school year. But there are also less motivated students who seek refuge in playing truant. Our letter of the month recounts how playing truant in the past could turn out to be quite hazardous. The letter is written by a disobedient son of Enno Doedes Star (1631-1707) (see picture), a vice-admiral who took part in several battles at sea during the Second and Third Anglo-Dutch Wars.

Enno Doedes Star was not just anybody and as a member of the high society he probably wanted to secure the best education for his children. He sent one of his sons to the Spanish town of Cadiz (see picture) to learn Spanish: an international exchange programme avant-la-lettre. The boy most probably stayed with merchants in Cadiz – there were a lot of Dutch and Flemish merchants to be found in the Spanish harbour city at that time – and we should not be under the impression that he attended a Spanish school. In those days it was customary that a boy stayed

with family, friends or acquaintances in another city so that he could work for them as an intern and in doing so learn a trade or a language. Enno Doedes Star might have regretted the decision to send his son to Cadiz, however, because the boy was not exactly a model student and managed to get himself into trouble far away from home. We know this because we have a letter written by the young Star in which he humbly asks his parents to forgive him for his unseemly behaviour.

Star Jr. starts his letter traditionally, informing his parents that he is still in good health. This part is followed by a more unusual piece of information as he writes that he is currently employed on a privateer on its way to Lisbon. The rest of the letter shows us bit by bit what amazing wanderings the boy has made. First he shamefully ran away from Cadiz where he was supposed to learn Spanish. It remains a mystery in what conditions he must have tramped about the country, because he does not go into details. Then he recounts that he was imprisoned in Spain because he refused to join the Spanish fleet. Eventually he gave in – probably out of a lack of money – and served the Spanish as a cavalry man for a year. But he was not lucky, because as a Spanish horseman he was captured by the Portuguese. And in Portugal too he was forced to join the army:



“so I was imprisoned again by the Portuguese in Portugal and being there I was forced to join the military again, because I was completely naked because they had taken all my clothes and injured me as well and I did not have any money to pay for medical care so that I had to sign up again.”

After this Portuguese adventure, Star Jr. managed to board a ship that was heading for France. In Bordeaux he changed to a privateer that would sail to Lisbon. During this last trip the boy wrote his parents a remorseful letter to let them know that he was on his way home. He was hoping to find a ship in the Portuguese harbour that would go to the Netherlands and could take him back to his parents, his brother and his sister.

This amazing story leaves us with a number of mysteries altogether. Since the letter was not signed, we do not know which of Enno Doedes Star’s sons was so adventurous. Enno Doedes Star and his first wife Reynouw Gaikinga probably had a daughter and four sons: Doede (1652), Joannes (1653), Gerrit (1654), Anna (1655) and Cornelis (1667). Even though the letter is not dated, we believe it was written in 1666 because of its finding place. The letter was found in a bundle of letters that were sent from Bordeaux and that all stem from that year. They are all attached to one another with a piece of string (a so-called ‘file’). Now if Star Junior’s letter was written in 1666 and if the birth year of the eldest son Doede is correct, the writer of the letter could not have been much older than fourteen. This seems

hard to believe considering the adventures that the letter writer has been through, but it is not impossible. A big question mark as well is how his parents reacted to the return of their lost son. Did they reject him or did they welcome him with open arms? And have his adventures influenced the rest of his life? Did he become successful or did he remain the family's disgrace for the rest of his life? In any case, it is ironic that in trying to get away from learning, this truant probably had an unforgettable and authentic language immersion experience in the Spanish and Portuguese army.

The letter is kept in HCA 30-643. A first transcription of this letter was made by Arie Pos. The comment on this monthly letter is provided by Judith Nobels. The quotations have been translated freely.