

Biographical data Jef Last



Jef Last (The Hague, 2 May 1898) was the son of Carel Christiaan Anthony Last, Chief inspector of Labour, and Helena Johanna Maria Verstijnen, a planter's daughter. Because of his father's work the family regularly moved. Sometimes he went with his father on inspection visits. Because of this he soon witnessed the abuses in some factories. He read a lot of revolutionary literature. In 1916 he was sent off the HBS (higher secondary school) in Amsterdam because he was unmanageable. The same year his parents divorced. The thinking along fixed lines of his father collided with the joyful, artistic attitude of his mother. Jef Last finished the HBS in Alkmaar.

After this he became active in a workers house in Amsterdam and started working in the mines in Limburg. For him the Russian Revolution was the impulse to study the works of Karl Marx and in 1917 he became a member of the Social-Democratic Labour Party (SDAP). From 1918 he studied Chinese language and literature in Leiden and in Hamburg. He became a member of the student association but soon turned to Katwijk, where he felt at home between the fishermen. He wrote fierce articles for the student magazine *Virtus*. In 1919 he broke off his study and served in the navy. Then a period of searching and with several jobs followed. (In 1947 he received his bachelors' in Leiden and in 1957 he received his Ph.D. in Hamburg on a thesis about the modern Chinese poet Loe Hsjuun). Jack-of-all-trades and master of none would describe him well, he explained in an interview in 1969.

In 1925 Last was offered a function in the recently established cultural organisation of the SDAP and the Dutch Trades Union, the Institute for Labour Development (IVAO). As the chief of the film service he drove the 'Red Car' through the country. His political ideas became less free of obligations. Dissatisfied with the politics of the SDAP on The Netherlands Indies he quit the film service and moved with wife and children to Rotterdam. In 1928 he became a teacher (Primary School) there and worked for some time as replacement teacher. He also found a job at the Zuiderzee Works and in a pressure gauges factory. In 1928 he worked as a scriptwriter and actor for the film *Branding* (Surf) by Joris Ivens and Mannus Franken. His first short story was published with the same title (Arnhem 1930). With this story Last not only made a name as an author, but he also found more inspiration in the anti-colonial and revolutionary struggle. In 1930 he left the SDAP. He had revolutionary ideas, also according to the postcard he sent to Jaap van Hattum in the thirties: '*Dear Jaap, I can't visit you today, as agreed, because any moment the revolution can break out and I can't be missed when this happens. Jour Jef.*' (C. Budingh', Diary notes 1967-1972). For a year he was the secretary of Sneevliet, from the Revolutionary Socialist Labour Party (RSAP), youth leader, speaker, editor of a couple of magazines, including *Links Richten* (Aim Left).

Meanwhile Last was impressed by the Soviet Union, where he went in November 1931 for the first time to write a report for *Het Leven* (Life). In 1932 he started working as a Dutch reporter at the International Union for Revolutionary Writers in Moscow and made a big tour in the Ural. After this tour, at the end of 1932, he became a member of the Dutch Communist Party (CPN). At first Last mainly wrote poetry; worked as a poet for the socialist yearbooks *Tijdsignalen* (Time Signals, 1929-1930). He also wrote short novels, but most of all became the center of attention with big works like *Partij remise* (Party Remise, 1933), a simultaneous novel which depicts through various persons and social backgrounds the social contrasts in the twenties in Holland, and the report novel *Zuiderzee* (Southern Sea, 1934). Jef told he was the compiler or even co-writer of *Wij slaven van Suriname* (We slaves of Suriname, Amsterdam 1934) of Anton de Kom – see Surinam section on this site. Last frequently went to Paris to help German refugees, he smuggled emigrants from Holland through Belgium, and became impressed by the French proletariat and intellectuals like Louis Aragon and André Malraux. Being a writer his most important meeting was with André Gide. Influenced by him he wrote the novel *Zuiderzee*, his first book where homosexuality plays an important part. Last translated Gide's work and travelled with him to Morocco.

After a journey together to the Soviet Union in 1936 he swore off communism. By his contacts with Gide he became aware of his homosexual nature and started speaking and publishing about it.



In 1936 Last joined the fight in the civil war in Spain, which lost him his Dutch citizenship, and made it a captain. There he wrote *Brieven uit Spanje* (Letters from Spain) (1936) and *In de loopgraven voor Madrid* (In the trenches before Madrid) (1937). Like Gide, he was critical about the Soviet communism. At the end of 1937 a Moscow loyal court-martial tried to sentence him to death. He fled to Scandinavia and in March 1938 he quit the CPN (Communist Party of the Netherlands). In Norway Last was supported by Willy Brandt who gave him jobs as an interpreter. When Last on his way back to Holland was arrested at the Dutch border in Zundert, he wrote from prison *De laatste waarheid* (The Last Truth) (Rotterdam 1938). He kept roaming the Scandinavian countries, as a propagandist for Spain. He learned to speak Norwegian, Swedish and Danish. Last worked under the leadership of Edo Fimmen in Antwerp and Narvik for the International Transport Workers Federation

(ITF) among the German sailors, and came back to Holland at the end of 1939, where he made a living as a journalist for the newspaper the *Groene Amsterdammer*. In 1940 his documentary novel about Scandinavia was published: *Kinderen van de middernachtszon* (Children of the Midnight Sun, Amsterdam) and in autumn he founded, together with Tom Rot, Eddy Wijnkoop and Dirk Schilp, the underground magazine *De Vonk*. During the Second World War Jef Last was active in the resistance. After the war he made himself useful to *De Vlam* (The Flame), the continuation of *De Vonk*, which regularly organised camps to promote the friendship between the German and Dutch youth. In 1947 his Dutch citizenship was officially returned to him.

In January 1923 he married Ida ter Haar; her father was a member of parliament for the Christian Historical Union (CHU). Together they had three daughters. In May 1938 they divorced. In May 1946 they remarried. Ida was active in the communist youth movement and the founder of the Elleboog Circus. From 1950 until 1954 Jef Last was a teacher and advisor to the government on art and culture in Bali. He went to Indonesia by invitation of Mohammed Hatta and Soekarno, who knew some anti-colonial poems of Jef Last by heart. Back in Europe he combined his study with a correspondence for the newspaper 'Het Vrije Volk' in Hamburg, made journeys for this and the newspaper 'Het Parool' to the Far East and even found some time in between to write about ten poetry volumes and about thirty novels. He wrote for instance *Zo zag ik Indonesië* (This is how I saw Indonesia, 1956). When in 1958 he finally received his Ph.D. in Hamburg (Chinese, minor subjects Japanese and Indonesian) his daughter quite rightly said: 'It took you long enough though'.

In 1963 he received the Marianne Philips Price and in 1966 from the Universiteit of Münster (Germany) the Vondel Price. His socialist-anarchistic blood ran quicker than water and in 1966 he had himself put on a (non eligible) place on the Provo-list for the local council elections of Amsterdam. In the same year *Mijn vriend André Gide* (My friend André Gide) (Amsterdam, 1966) was published. He believes his best work was the poetry volume *De bevrijde Eros* (The Liberated Eros) and his poetical war diary *Oog in oog* (Eye to Eye). During the last years of his life he lived with his wife in the Rosa Spier House in Laren. Jef Last died in 1972 of cancer. This ended a fine and boisterous political and writing life.

Sources:

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