

FROM LOOSDUINEN TO LOS ANGELES: THE TRANSATLANTIC FLOW OF SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH A DUTCH IMMIGRANT FAMILY, 1910-1940

Hans Krabbendam

Published in George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam, eds., *Morsels in the Melting Pot: The Persistence of Dutch Immigrant Communities in North America* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2006), 169-185.

Introduction

One of the issues in this volume on ethnicity and cultural values is the tension between a close(d) community and the outside world. While this subject might appear to deal with a problematic relationship, a recent sociological contribution draws attention to the positive interaction between these two realms. Social scientists introduced the concept of “social capital” to analyze small group civic cohesion and the maintenance of a healthy democracy. Social capital is an umbrella concept for analyzing, and often advancing, resources that build community, be it institutional, intellectual, economical, or religious.¹ In this volume Dutch sociologist Peter Ester advocates the application of this concept to Dutch-American immigration history. Its distinction between bonding and bridging aspects of social capital, respectively strengthening “thick” relationships of trust and “thin” relationships asking less commitment but opening up access to new networks, has apparent relevance for immigration research. Since religious networks are given great importance in building relationships of solidarity, necessary for a soundly functioning civil society, its value for Dutch immigration history with its strong religious tradition, is evident. The concept of social capital has its limitations, however, it is after all an economic metaphor, which might suggest that economic success is more important than social improvement and that applications of techniques will generate positive results. Historians might find the use of this concept as a social policy instrument a bit suspect because the concentration on structural relations might obscure the importance of worldviews, but social scientists are aware of these limitations.²

Ester encourages historians to use this concept for comparative research on different ethnic and religious groups, since much of the output of historians remains too descriptive. I gladly accept his call to apply this concept and put it to a test, not in a large comparative project, which has been partly done for stable homogeneous ethnic communities in rural Iowa by geographer Janel Curry, but by exploring its heuristic value for research of the smallest group, the ethnic family, in a dynamic urban setting in California.³ In appropriating this concept, I will search for patterns that have otherwise remained unnoticed. The purpose of this paper is to explore this concept on a small scale, which seems to me a necessary exercise before moving on to a more generalized comparison. An additional goal is to supplement the predominantly institutional perspectives of the other papers in this collection with a view from the bottom-up. The concept of social capital applied to this limited domain raises the following sets of research questions: 1) Can individuals “take” their social capital with them to a different setting or from one country to the next? How do reciprocal relations work and are they fair for everyone? Who helped first and what did he/she receive in return? How successful is the first generation of immigrants in accumulating social capital and transferring it to the next? Which role does language play in this process? 2) How do familial relationships and membership in voluntary organizations differ in bonding and bridging functions? Does the relative importance of these respective functions change over time? What is the role of institutions compared to personal relationships in building and maintaining social capital? 3) What is the role of religion in the formation of social capital that is usable in a larger civic environment? Is it a only a positive force or does it also challenge social structures by encouraging isolation from the world either voluntary or forced by an unwelcoming society? How do the bonding and the bridging processes interact, and with which results? Does commitment to a body of believers or religious institutions generate participation in secular parts of society? Do competing religious institutions strengthen or weaken social capital for an ethnic group? Are the members the beneficiaries only or do others beyond the group also benefit?

This article will use these questions to direct an analysis of the life of an immigrant family. The family offers a proper case for dissecting the individual or collective character of social capital and the interaction between religion and social capital. The family's development is followed here through letters, which function almost as a collective diary of its social agenda. I will focus on the growth and change of social contacts.

Sources and Methods

The Polder family constitutes a history of twentieth-century immigrants with a strong religious identity that can be researched first hand thanks to a voluminous collection of five hundred letters sent by the Polder family members to the Netherlands.⁴ They cover the formative years of the Dutch subculture in Southern California in the period 1910-1940. The letters may count as representative for a larger group since the authors arrived during the apex of European immigration (the first Polder arrived in the record year of 1907), they were members of the largest protestant church in the Netherlands, they had a middle-class background in a transition area between city and countryside, and they came as a family unit. The letters reveal the impact of the old world contacts, the interaction with a new environment, the role of the church, the decisions to keep certain cultural and religious features and/or adopt new ones. The corpus of letters was produced by an extended family with a central position for the (grand)parents, who were mainly responsible for reporting and interpreting the day-to-day developments. This correspondence provides a long-term perspective necessary to find partial answers to the research questions. The family concerns include religious, educational, and business relations. The size of the collection and the fact that these letters were preserved is evidence for the strong bonds within this family. The letters themselves functioned as currency in the social capital market, especially in its transatlantic dimension. The intimacy of the correspondents and the relative immediacy guarantee honest reports of actual affairs interspersed with moments of reflection. The body of correspondence allows one to distinguish among the authors and their relationships, while the migration experience follows the transfer of social capital across the Atlantic. In addition to these letters, church records help in exploring the inner workings of the primal community and the influence of institutions.⁵

The Immigrant Polder Family

The Polder family came to the United States in stages. Typically for immigrants from the Netherlands, adult sons prepared the way for other siblings. California was not a planned destination and fell outside the core communities of Dutch immigrants in the Midwest. The departure of the Polders had been a rational decision for future improvement. The Polder family lived amid old money, but lacked any capital for itself. Pater familias Dirk Polder (1854-1922) had worked as a gardener at various estates in The Hague. He tended the grounds of "Rust en Vreugd" [Rest and Joy] till 1904, when the owner died and moved to take care of the vacant castle "Oud-Wassenaar" [Old Wassenaar]. This job offered free housing and use of the grounds in exchange for maintaining and airing the empty building. The family sold the surplus produce of the garden in the city, but this was no strong basis for a family enterprise, especially when the castle was sold to become a hotel in 1908 and Dirk took up the job of gardener and forester of "Ockenburgh" in the village of Loosduinen, south of The Hague. When Dirk's bronchitis wore him out, which began to irritate his new employer who saw him as a servant, whereas his previous boss had treated him as a confidant, the future looked grim.⁶

The sons left one at the time. The eldest, Jan (1884) went to the United States and worked his way from the East coast to the West, ending up in Los Angeles, where he found employment in greenhouses and flower nurseries. His two other brothers, Leendert and Waandert with a company of friends, tried their luck in Paris, Zurich, and England between 1908 and 1909, and eventually joined their brother in California. Without a regular pension, in poor health, and with three of his sons gone, Dirk decided to accept their invitation to join them in California, where they had set up a nursery of their own in Montebello, just east of Los Angeles. In August 1914, on the brink of the outbreak of the Great War, the elderly parents, Dirk Polder and Cornelia Hemerling (1858-1941) and their two youngest daughters, Johanna age 11 and Jannetje age 15 joined them, followed by youngest brother Jacob in 1916, who had been drafted in the army. Three married children stayed behind: the oldest daughter Marie, oldest son Dirk (who had a degree from Delft Technical College), and the darling of

the family, Cornelia (van der Baan), who had recently married and become a mother. Her paraplegic husband had just entered a new job as teacher at a Christian school in Roosendaal and later in Leiden and was unlikely to be admitted to America due to his disability.

The emigration of the elder Polders had been encouraged by the fact that the economic core members of the family had made a promising beginning in California. What did they take with them in terms of social capital? First of all they came with a substantial set of primary relations. Though four (later three) children stayed behind in the Netherlands, the seven family members complemented one another. The adult sons generated revenue and provided accommodation, the parents helped out in household duties and maintained contacts with the Old Country and the youngest daughters introduced the family to the educational and cultural traditions of the host country thanks to the public school. (When they arrived, there was no Dutch Reformed Christian school in the state.)⁷

The Polders lost most of their physical contacts with the old country, though occasional visits did happen. They were able to cope with this loss thanks to an intense correspondence that activated their own family life. The elderly Polders missed their children in the Netherlands more than their children in America did. These feelings were fanned by the arrival of a new generation. The parents left most of their social capital behind and had less opportunity than the younger siblings to replenish it with new contacts.

The Polders in the Netherlands were middle class with considerable standing in their community. Their home had been a social center and even in America the parents could impress their audience with acquaintances of repute. Dirk remembered meeting statesman Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and his former landlord, the kind C.J. Van der Oudermeulen, who had connections to the royal family and the national upper class.⁸ Moreover, they were well connected with a broad circle of *hervormde* ministers and Christian school teachers. Also in the village of Loosduinen and neighboring The Hague they were well integrated. Most of the “thin” occasional contacts evaporated, but the extensive correspondence kept the stories circulating, provoked visits, maintained friendships, and contributed to the well-being of the family. Subscriptions to Dutch newspapers and periodicals satisfied the need for knowledge about the old country and its institutions, recreated the old atmosphere and provided a Dutch lens through which the world was interpreted.⁹ Corresponding was a real social activity. Family members contributed to each others’ letters, authors paraphrased or quoted from other letters or visitors. The answers were read aloud and circulated among family and friends. When in 1924 Cornelia Polder, a widow since 1922, returned to the Netherlands for a year to catch up with her friends and relations, the letter exchange stalled temporarily and slightly decreased after her return to California: her curiosity was satisfied. The reciprocal services — a crucial part of social capital — were limited, but did not completely disappear from the transatlantic exchange. Small favors continued, such as providing comfort and advice, mailing books and magazines, exchanging small gifts, delivering messages, and negotiating loans. In this sense, the immigrants maintained their intimate relationships in the old country.

The most celebrated part of the imported social capital was the family tradition to observe Sundays, birthdays, and anniversaries. Inspired by Polder, Sr., the boys showed their humorous side and created a congenial atmosphere, during which they freely shared stories, opinions about religious and political affairs, jokes, and rhymes. The women contributed to the pleasantness by homemade pastries and cakes. Detailed descriptions of these events in letters confirmed the family bond and served as compensation for the Dutch relatives who naturally could not join them. The American branch continued to care for needy family members in the Netherlands. When in 1928 daughter Marie died, leaving six young children, they wired money to pay part of the expenses for the children’s vacation. The social capital worked across the Atlantic. Many of the Polders’ Dutch-American friends returned to the Netherlands for visits, others came over to visit them. Bulb growers and merchants from the Netherlands were always welcome and became personal friends as well as sources of information. The move to California worked out well for the Polders, who had once feared this “step into the darkness,” but discovered it was a walk into the light.¹⁰ They were never completely cut off from their old network thanks to the age distribution within the family, their relative prosperity, the quality of the connections, and perhaps most important, the healthy and strong social fabric of the family.

After World War I, travel picked up and California became an important passing station for Dutch citizens on their way to or from the Dutch East Indies as well as a destination for immigrants from the Netherlands and migrants from the Midwest. Distant relatives and friends of friends were welcomed at the Polder residence. Some even spent a number of weeks with the Polders to seek jobs and housing.¹¹

The immigration experience of the Polders supports the view that social capital rests in collective relationships rather than individual qualities. As a family the Polders created a strong, safe, and outgoing atmosphere, which proved indispensable for exploiting their social capital. This was shown by the fruits of their investment in maintaining the communication with the old country.

Work

For the “thin” economic and occasional relationships the Polders could not fall back on an existing community. They had to create a place of their own, because the Dutch trek to Los Angeles was still in its initial stage. The Polders arrived at a time of economic prosperity, prompted by the oil industry, which stimulated overseas commerce, shipping, industry, agriculture, banking and tourism, earning the name “Oildorado” for Los Angeles.¹²

The Polder brothers were fortunate to find employment for which they were prepared in the Netherlands in a flower nursery, and a Dutch boss, Cees Groen, with whom they founded a flower farm. In December 1915 they bought him out, according to the family chronicles, because the man had forced himself on the oldest Polder daughter, but this was not the only reason. He, with his rough, disagreeable character, did not belong to a church and his life style created tension.¹³ This combination did not work in the firm, which became more and more a family operation. The incident opened up the opportunity to create a real family farm, in which all the investments contributed to the business. For a period of five years the brotherly cooperation went smoothly, but it became more complex when they started families. All six of the siblings were married in four years, between 1917 and 1921, the three oldest brothers within the first year. They were joined by their youngest brother Jacob (in 1916), and three years later by his fiancée. After 1920, disagreement arose among the four brothers how to match their loyalty to the family business and the joint care for the parents with the desire for privacy. Two brothers (Jacob and Leendert) desired to separate work and family, agreed to be bought out and found other jobs. The expectations of the various spouses proved decisive. Some of them were disappointed that their husbands looked more like laborers than owners. Jacob had a smaller share than his older brothers. The disagreement was solved, but the tension simmered for the next decades. However, the family farm was saved and remained the anchorage for other family members to spread their wings.

The nursery was a stable place, the center of the family, and kept a common dialog going. It welcomed laborers from the Netherlands, from the Dutch-American community, and from without (with employees from Germany, Mexico, and Japan, as well as a few Americans). It was an integrated harmonious existence.¹⁴ The florist nursery at one time employed thirteen men, who slept and ate at the farm. The two sisters worked as secretaries and domestics and sometimes in clothing factories before they married at a young age. The youngest brother to arrive proved most enterprising. He found himself a permanent position as gardener with the Standard Oil Company and generated handsome extra money by running a simple motel. He tapped into California’s booming tourist industry, which kept going during the depression.¹⁵ Most of the second and third generation members found other jobs in the service industry and agriculture.

The Polder’s work experience also testified to the collectiveness of social capital. The fall out with the business partner Cees Groen and later between the brothers did not terminate their enterprise, nor weaken their position. They had access to alternative sources of labor; employers could use their skills and hire employees as needed.

Church Connections

For the Polder family the institution of the church was of great importance and the church provided bridges because the bonds were strong. The Polder brothers had joined the first Dutch church in Los Angeles (a Christian Reformed Church) as soon as it was founded in May 1914, after three years of recruitment by itinerant ministers and services at private homes. They were willing to cover the great

distance, in the beginning without a car, to attend the two worship services and Sunday school classes.¹⁶ Soon this sacrifice proved too much. They were gone for the entire day to attend two services and had to solicit the hospitality of fellow members for the day. They requested to move the 3:00 pm service to 6:30 pm, allowing them to return to their home, but the consistory declined this request. While various Dutchmen decided to join English speaking churches, the Polders felt at home in the Christian Reformed Church of Rev. F.J. Drost and made the best of it. He was not the most charismatic person, but his sermons were familiar, making the new arrivals feel as if they attended a service at home. This was important for these brothers who had emigrated in their late thirties and were at first far from proficient in English. They shared a moderate pietistic worldview and witnessed with regret how the dynamic urban life of Los Angeles lured many Dutchmen away from the church to the beaches, cinema's, and other attractions on Sunday. They did not want to give in to these temptations, though they were not strict Sabbatarians. Some fellow church members accused them of desecrating the Sunday when they picked their flowers to be sold on the market early Monday morning, but this was necessary labor in the Polders' eyes. The confrontation with disagreeable characters did not cause them to leave the church, because they were committed to it and were richly compensated by new friendships.¹⁷

Their congregation had been formerly established in 1914 when twelve Dutch families contributed a total of one thousand dollars to buy a lot and build a modest edifice, erected in two weeks by two men, for a grand total of sixty-five people, and received a \$800 loan from the denomination. This small group was the main pond to fish in for primary contacts for a period of seven years, when the congregation finally expanded. Many members shared their upward middle class status and came to visit. The bridging function of the church became apparent in the slow but steady adaptation to the social needs of its members in an American environment, in the language change and conceived civic duties. In May 1918 the consistory added a third service at 7:30 pm in English, also the Sunday school classes were held in English.¹⁸ The elder Polders never could understand an English sermon, but the sons attended the English evening services, because they liked the new minister. Dirk Polder taught his daughters the tradition of the Reformed faith at home from Dutch and translated English books.¹⁹

In the church they learned to cope with the American patriotism that was so strongly present in World War I. When seventeen members asked to display the American flag at the church front, the consistory decided to place the flag inside the auditorium. The church honored President Woodrow Wilson's request to devote an hour of prayer to the war conditions. At a more festive moment, they learned how to celebrate Labor Day with a church picnic.²⁰

The bridging efforts of the early church were restricted to these cultural issues; most energy was invested in bonding. Thanks to the joint strength, the congregation could reach out to meet the many Dutchmen who were alienated from the faith, to get them back on the right track and help them to find jobs and housing.²¹ As much as the Polders associated with the Dutch Reformed, their friendships were not restricted to their church. They gladly hired Roman Catholics or destitute Hollanders to work in their nursery.²²

Their church benefited from the popularity of California among travelers, also Dutch-American tourists. One of these visitors was Rev. Johannes Groen from Grand Rapids, Michigan, who came to recuperate, left, and later returned to serve the church as its minister. He was responsible for speeding up the process of cultural adaptation. During his tenure they began to sing the doxology, the youth collected funds for a piano, three out of four catechism sermons were held in English, the minutes were kept in English and the church announced its presence through advertisements in the local newspaper.²³ In 1922, the church became financially independent, the members became active in the national denomination and its growth demanded a new edifice, calculated to cost \$10,000. The growth was spectacular, from 15 families (87 souls) in 1921 to 50 families (180 souls) in 1922. At the end of the decade 80 families and 350 souls were connected to the church.²⁴

Changes continued in the early 1920s: the congregational singing was accompanied by a double quartet, awaiting the completion of the new church and organ. Holy Communion was celebrated with individual cups instead of a common cup, and the members formed a church choir and orchestra. The minister received a salary of \$1,500 and a \$250 advance to pay for his car.²⁵ In theological affairs also the Christian Reformed Church of Los Angeles turned a progressive corner.

Rev. Groen sided with Calvin Theological Seminary professor Ralph Janssen, who had a more liberal view on miracles than most of his colleagues, but Groen died in May 1924, before he could exert his influence nationally. Groen had been the strongest advocate of rapid assimilation and a lonely campaigner for union and women's rights in his denomination. He had steered the prominent Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids in the shift to English, for some the changes were not fast enough. Many members transferred to a Presbyterian church, Jacob Polder among them. Others tried to abolish the Dutch services, which caused the lovers of Dutch to transfer as well.²⁶

Groen's successor, Rev. Gerhardus Holwerda, was also a Dutch American by birth and continued the course taken, but lacking the authority of his predecessor and lost his grip on the process. He became discouraged and accepted a teaching position at the University of California after two years' service. A small group of a dozen members fought a rearguard battle against change. They objected to the choir and regretted the discontinuation of Dutch traditions to hold a service on New Year's Day, maintain a Christian school, visit each family annually, consistently teach from the Heidelberg Catechism, and bar non-members from the Communion table. They were ready to found a separate congregation, but were not allowed to do so, and complied.²⁷ The Dutch language service was cancelled at the beginning of 1925, marking the end of the immigrant phase of the church. The trend had been clear and inevitable: the timing of the Dutch service in the afternoon, while the English morning service was followed by Sunday School, creamed off the energy for the afternoon service, while the introduction of American elements (choir, piano, short sermon) alienated the Dutch oriented even more.

An alternative for this group arose, when the Reformed Church in America (RCA) established a congregation in the area in 1923, with a Dutch service in the morning drawing 40-50 participants, led by an elder pastor Martin Flipse who was committed to the Dutch language. This combination attracted the Dutch-speaking Christian Reformed members, of whom only ten to twelve attended their own afternoon service, without an organist or Sunday School. This signaled the end of the Dutch service in the Christian Reformed Church. That the Christian Reformed Church Americanized earlier than the Reformed Church was unique, but this can be understood as a result of the Christian Reformed Church's eagerness to attract new immigrants.²⁸ When the local Reformed Church acquired a new minister, Henry Beltman, the process of abandonment of the Dutch language quickly repeated itself: the Dutch service was moved to three o'clock in 1931 and abolished altogether in the spring the next year.²⁹

This process repeated itself in 1932, when Rev. Herman Hoeksema traveled to Los Angeles to found a branch of the Protestant Reformed Church at the West Coast. One of his supporters approached the attendees of the Dutch services of Rev. Beltman and invited them to a meeting. Jan and Waan Polder went and grandma Cornelia Polder admitted that she would always go if she lived closer to the city, "especially because it is in Dutch," the organ played and she could sing the old familiar psalms, but also because she met many old acquaintances.³⁰ Eventually the Polders attended the Dutch services in the Bellflower Christian Reformed Church, where a large Dutch dairy settlement had developed and a Christian Reformed Church was founded in 1927.³¹

When grandma Polder reached her seventy-seventh birthday, no Dutch-American churches in her neighborhood offered Dutch language services.³² In this period the city of Los Angeles was ninety percent white, a WASP city and, according to historian Kenneth Star, "an openly Christian community." Its openness generated eccentric preachers, such as the therapeutic Aimee Semple McPherson, who dramatized her sermons, and vice fighter Bob Shuler of Trinity Methodist, who was one of the first preachers to spread his conservative political ideas by radio.³³ Mrs. Polder went to see both religious performers, but stayed within the Dutch-American fold, in which she found nourishment for her soul.

Family and Church as Complements

The question whether the church or the family was more important for providing social capital is almost a false dichotomy, since both networks were in full accord: the family functioned also as an institution and the church behaved as a family. In both instances alienation could happen. Both were intense means of identification. The family was the basis for bonding and bridging. Membership in

different churches increased the scope of the family and helped, for instance, to make a maximum use of Dutch language services.

The church fit the Polders perfectly, its members not only shared their worldview, but also their social economic status as small entrepreneurs and laborers. They shared the concern for compatriots in need of assistance. Active membership in a Protestant church was fully acceptable to Americans. As such it helped them along.

A clear example of the interest paid by their social network were the scores of Dutch immigrants who donated their blood when in 1919 Jan Polder needed several blood transfusions to battle a stomach infection. The hospitalization cost \$200 and an additional \$20 per treatment, but the joined effort helped Jan to recover. This positive experience further strengthened the bonds, because Jan stayed in touch with his donors.³⁴

The foreign experience of the sons prior to their departure for America made them familiar with being uprooted, but hardly prepared them for living in an English-speaking country. Learning the language took much effort. The day to day activities excused them from using English at home. The Dutch language remained active for decades. The daughters had the advantage of English schooling, the youngest even attended high school. The children tried to teach their aged parents English, but though they practiced eagerly, they never advanced beyond standard phrases and individual words. The first grandchildren were versed in Dutch, but the later ones did not master it.³⁵ The names Lilian and George for two of them showed the inevitable shift to English identifiers. At the nursery and the church the language held out. Social capital was collected in a small, but intimate circle.

Consumerism

While little is known about the specific content of the economic transactions of the business, it seemed to operate smoothly. Waan and Jan joined voluntary associations, such as the organization of bulb growers. The Polders easily found their place in the emerging consumer economy, contributed to it with their products (flowers), innovated their operations (from oil to natural gas), invested, built, bought and sold property, in sum, they fully participated in the larger economic network.³⁶

Historian Carey McWilliams stated that the population of California mirrored the entire population of the United States, and as such was more American than the other states.³⁷ The Golden State still bore the marks of the melting pot caused by the gold fever of 1849 — high mobility and continuous expansion. It drew immigrants and as many American citizens from other states. The dynamic phase of a young, well educated, and vibrant population in an urban setting continued, while it slackened in other parts of the country. Thanks to an overrepresentation of the cohort between twenty and fifty years the productivity secured a high standard of living.

The California economy, especially in the big cities, offered new immigrants more opportunities than elsewhere, but also less stability. The emerging industries caused high turnovers of jobs, while building sprees pushed Los Angeles to the fifth largest city in the United States.³⁸ The Polder brothers participated eagerly in the building, planning, and financing. In the early 1920s they all had larger homes built and the upgrading of the one stimulated the plans of the others. California as the motor of much modernization in America motivated the Polders to easily take on loans, buy and sell real estate, listen to modern mass media, and enjoy leisure and entertainment. However, they kept their expenses under control, did not overextend their credit, and remained critical of the lures of modern entertainment. They gladly bought the available household conveniences.³⁹

Historian Kevin Starr characterized the 1920s for California as follows: “In California and elsewhere, the 1920s represented the exuberant takeover of urban America by corporate business structures and materialistic values. Suddenly, the world became filled with manufactured objects, consumer goods., ... [T]he major social and political energies of the 1920s, in Southern California especially, focused upon material construction and the pursuit of the good life.”⁴⁰ The church gave the Polders a counter force against materialism, though they were grateful for their washing machines and sanitary improvements. The Polders enjoyed serious warning sermons and rejected the easy convictions of many American believers.⁴¹ But even the church was tainted with California boosterism. An overview of the fifteen year history of the church in *The Banner* concluded with the appeal: “[C]ome to live here and help us to enjoy the summer as well as winter and to experience the

spirit to [sic] the church of Los Angeles.” Especially the female family members indulged in consumer goods, which greatly alleviated their tasks through machines, compared to the old country.⁴²

Just like the other inhabitants of Los Angeles, the Polders fully used the increasing automobility. Whereas they took street cars in the first phase of their life, they soon bought a company car, and added private cars over the years. This allowed them to see nature and make full use of the dispersed Dutch contacts. In 1927 the metropolitan area of Los Angeles counted almost ten times as many cars as the entire car population in the Netherlands.⁴³

Illustratie : Parking lot of Ripon Christian Reformed Church, California in the 1920s.

Credit: Archives, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

From Bonds to Bridges

The church not only fed the Polder’s religious needs, it also provided spouses for the boys. Though the parents would have preferred their sons to return to the Netherlands for a Dutch girl, they were not disappointed with the courting of their sons.⁴⁴ In 1916 all the sons went courting and the Dutch-American girls were the only ones they could easily meet. The precedent of the first Dutch-American marriage stimulated the siblings to do the same. It was about time; the sons were in their thirties, the daughters married young, as American girls did. The secondary contacts were also with fellow Dutchmen, who came to California for a variety of reasons, from the Dutch East Indies and colonies in Argentina and South Africa. It was a richly varied group, with a number of adventurers and men who had abandoned their spouses. Those who remembered the class system in the Netherlands enjoyed the egalitarian way of life in California. A friendship developed between Grandma Polder and a Dutch Lady, who came from Chicago with her son for health reasons. They worshipped in the same church because her English was not proficient enough for socializing with other believers. Cornelia Polder realized that wealth perished and boundaries disappeared, but nonetheless she felt proud to have a close friend who had been a neighbor in the Netherlands but of a different class.⁴⁵ Ultimately, Cornelia preferred her contacts with Hollanders, because she felt at home with them. She did not visit Americans.⁴⁶ The daughters were the channels for political and civic information. They explained the political process and revealed the rights of women, but the brothers had no time to bother with politics.⁴⁷

An important occasion to test the relationship of the immigrants with the new nation was the call to arms in the spring of 1917. The four brothers had registered and found out that one at age 31 was too old, and two were not drafted. One, Leendert, appealed to the Board for exemption, but was drafted because he had taken his first papers to become a citizen; even efforts of relatives in the Netherlands to keep him out of the draft failed. The fact that the younger brother Jacob had been drafted into the Dutch army to protect the Dutch border, allows for a comparison of loyalties. Neither one desired to serve, but Jacob did until he left during a furlough for Sweden. He defended himself against the accusation of being a deserter by referring to his tour of duty. Leen went to training camp and arrived in France in early August 1918, but was saved after three weeks of serious fire by the Armistice on November 11. He returned in May 1919 and was welcomed by a crowd of fifty friends. The loyalties to the respective countries were present, but did not lead to eager participation in the war. The most excited participants were the sisters who sold war savings stamps through their schools.⁴⁸

Though they were reliable citizens, their civic commitment did not visibly spill over from their religious social environment. Only when political events interfered with Polder family life did the Polders feel urged to comment. They commented on prices and the Bank Holiday of March 1933, but not on the overall policy of the Depression or the experiments of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was after all, of Dutch descent. They were introduced in cultural aspects by the school, and discovered the cultural attractions sometimes via a Dutch journal: in *Het Schouwvenster*, Cornelia saw pictures of an library in Los Angeles which she subsequently visited. Apparently, a Dutch source had more authority.⁴⁹

Anna had gained an understanding of the American way of life thanks to her high school education. Jacob and his Dutch wife Cora connected most closely to American contacts as a result of their relative alienation from the rest of the family and their lack of an alternative family circle of in-laws.⁵⁰ They were the first to return to the Netherlands in May 1930, since his wife longed for her

Dutch family, Jacob could easily get a leave of absence, since his money was not tied up in the company. This was the earliest opportunity, since he had abandoned the Dutch army and needed twelve years of residence to be safe from the law. His three months' tour of his native land did not result in a positive attitude, it confirmed his choice to live in the USA.⁵¹ Cornelia identified with her old country and even hoped that national events in the Netherlands were held in nice weather. This went too far for the boys; "They do not feel much anymore for their old Orange-land," and she understood, since they had been gone for such a long time.⁵² Earlier than many other fellow Dutchmen in the United States, those in California had relationships with non-Europeans, their children attended school with Japanese and Mexican children and their grandchildren married Americans.⁵³

Conclusions

The source material allows most analysis of the first and third sets of questions, on the transfer of social capital and the role of religion. The role of other voluntary associations is scarcely documented.⁵⁴ Contrary to their expectations, the Polders were able to transfer some of their social capital from the Netherlands to California. First, their diversified family offered reciprocal and complementary services to one another. Second, the maintenance of the relations with the old world were enriched by contacts with Dutch-Americans in California. Dutch relations with American connections gained importance and were profitable for both sides. The maintenance of old bonds in the Netherlands helped to bridge the distance for others as well. New arrivals had a safe place to stay, which allowed them time to move on. Third, they could put their horticultural skills to use. The bilingualism in the family strengthened the relations and helped to pass on a remnant of the rich old world relational network to the next generation.

The bonding and bridging functions were divided within the family and not left to voluntary organizations. The intimacy of the family made the Polders relatively independent of others. While Dirk and Cornelia were especially strong in maintaining the bulk of the correspondence, acting as guardians of tradition, and taking on household tasks (cooking, cleaning, nursing), the economically active sons and daughters educated in America provided bridges to America and interpreted for the older generation. Old age, language deficiency, lack of mobility, and economic dependency prevented the parent generation from building many bridges. When a conflict broke the harmony in the family, this speeded up the process of integration for those members who were alienated most. Most bridging happened in daily economic transactions, which were necessary in an urban setting. Los Angeles was a booming city, with a big real estate market and a true "mobility culture". The Polders participated in this materialistic environment, but were aware of the risks. Their family business provided a solid foundation and an anchorage for fellow countrymen, but also a meeting place with a great variety of other nationalities, notably Japanese, Germans, Mexicans, and African Americans. They entertained different levels of solidarity with their own countrymen, but not exclusively or dogmatically so. California in the 1910-1950 period was an emerging economy, a growing population, a mobile society, and a land of great expectations, with space and opportunity. With a promising future in store, it was worthwhile to invest in social relationships. All family members subscribed to a moderate, pietistic, religious worldview, which tempered materialism and pleasure seeking, and encouraged responsibility and solidarity.

This brings us to the role of religion in the formation of social capital. The Polders' strong religious roots and outspoken conviction led them to search and join a church in the United States. Initially the church was most important in the bonding process and it was the exclusive source for marriage partners. The Polders needed the institutions as much as the institutions needed them. Despite the size and wealth of the family, the family circle was not sufficient to transfer its identity. The family profited from the level of church organization found in the Dutch American communities in the Midwest. They provided staff and funds to get their church started and linked the local church to a national body. This bond secured its continuity and growth by channeling members from other parts of the country after the curtailment of immigration by the Quota Acts of 1921 and 1924 and during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The bonding aspect of the church was initially much stronger than the bridging aspect, but bridging had to be done to keep the next generation on board. Various Dutch-American churches struggled with the same language and assimilation issues and followed a similar pattern of moving the

Dutch services to the margin of church life, surrounding them with “American” innovations, and eventually abandoning them. For a group of members, this proliferation of Dutch churches was an asset, since its circulation of the saints prevented the cutting off of language and social ties. Little direct civic activity spilled over from the bonding aspects of the church, but indirectly the church helped immigrants to take their positions as American citizens.

In sum, what did we gain from the introduction of the concept of social capital in a micro study of an immigrant family? The theory draws attention to the transfer of networks from the old country, which proved stronger than envisaged, and provides a tool to assess the strength of family relations, and the complementary roles of different generations. The strength of the family relationship in the old country and the strong desire to belong to a community stimulated the bonding process in the New World. Secondly, it supported the interpretation of social capital as an collective resource. The manouvres of the Polder family members can not be reduced to individual skills (even though social skills helped to bond and bridge), but were part of belonging to a group or network.

Thirdly, religion greatly strengthened the social capital of the Polders. Their sense of belonging to a body of believers who were responsible for each others’ well-being, especially during the pioneering stage of the Los Angeles church, increased their own stability. Much of the success in filling a reservoir of social capital depended on the past experience of the group, the strength of (religious) institutions, and on the specific historical circumstances.

Illustratie 2: Winter in the Golden State, Postcard 1910s

For Dirk Polder the combination of old and new was nearly perfect. At the end of his life, after he spent only seven years in the Golden State, his oldest son testified to his father’s happiness, despite his failing health: “if a Heaven on earth could be found [Dad] thought California would approach it most closely.”

Notes

¹ See Andrew K. Leigh and Robert D. Putnam, “Reviving Community: What Policy-makers Can Do to Build Social Capital in Britain and America,” *Renewal* 10.2 (2002): 15-20.

² I am indebted to Peter Ester for his candid explanation of the term in the essay included in this volume and his suggestions how to use it. Corwin Smidt, ed., *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 216.

³ Janel Curry, “Social Capital and Societal Vision: A Study of Six Farm Communities in Iowa,” in Smidt, *Religion as Social Capital*, 139-152.

⁴ I analysed these letters in my paper “Talking on Paper: The Polder Correspondence from California, 1910-1941” presented at the conference “California Dreams,” held in Middelburg, the Netherlands on 6 October 2000.

⁵ See David A. Gerber, “The Immigrant Letter between Positivism and Populism: The Uses of Immigrant Personal Correspondence in Twentieth-Century American Scholarship,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16 (Summer 1997): 3-34. Wolfgang Helbich and Ulrike Sommer, “Immigrant Letters as Sources,” in Christiane Harzig and Dirk Hoerder, eds., *The Press of Labor Migrants in Europe and North America 1880s-1930s* (Bremen: Labor Newspaper Preservation Projekt, 1985), 39-59.

⁶ Eduard C. Houbolt, *Wassenaar en omstreken. Gids* (Leiden: Gebroeders van der Hoek, [1904]), 31-32, 42. Corrie C. van der Baan, *Wel, heb je ooit...* (Hilversum: Privately printed, 1992), 15-16. Interview with Mrs. Adrie Lindeyer-Van der Baan and Mrs. Marie van der Baan, Zweth (Rotterdam), 6 September 2000.

⁷ The first grade school was founded in Redlands in 1917, but the distance was too great and the girls were beyond grade school age.

⁸ He had seen Groen van Prinsterer in his youth. See Letter, Dirk and Cornelia to Cor and Anton, August 1919. Polder family correspondence, copy at the Roosevelt Study Center Middelburg, the Netherlands, as well as at Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.

⁹ Periodicals such as the *Prins*, *Panorama*, later the *Wereldkroniek*, *Timotheus*, and especially *Het Schouwvenster*, and newspapers the *Amsterdammer* and the *Rotterdammer*.

¹⁰ Letter Dirk and Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 3 March and 28 December 1915; 14 August 1920; Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 31 March and 30 August 1929.

¹¹ Letter Dirk and Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 29 April 1919; 29 April and 2 August 1920; 3 May 1921; Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 28 February 1922.

¹² In 1910 about 808 Dutch citizens were spread out over the larger Los Angeles area. Their numbers increased to 1,683 in 1920 and swelled to 6,745 in 1930 and 12,000 in 1952. Trudy V. Selleck, “‘Land of Dreams and Profits’: Social Networks and Economic Success among Dutch Immigrants in Southern California’s Dairy Industry, 1920-1960” (Ph.D. dissertation University of California Riverside, 1995), 108.

¹³ Van der Baan, *Wel, heb je ooit...*, 167-170.

¹⁴ Letter, Jan and Gretha Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 17 January 1921, Jacob Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 26 February 1922; See for the larger importance of the family farm: Ronald Jager, *The Fate of Family Farming: Variations on an American Idea* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2004), 26-27.

¹⁵ Letter, Jansje and Anna Polder to Anton van der Baan, 25 August 1915, Dirk and Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 24 November 1915. Kevin Starr, *The Dream Endures: California Enters the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4-6.

¹⁶ In almost 18 per cent (88 letters) of the five hundred letters the authors discussed church matters extensively. Especially father Dirk monitored church life faithfully, summarized sermons, and admonished his relatives.

¹⁷ Letter, Dirk, Anna and Jantje Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 5 October 1914 and 10 November 1915; Minutes of First Christian Reformed Church of Los Angeles, California, (hereafter CRC LA) vol. 1, 26 July 1915 and 30 October 1916, 26 December 1917, 4 January 1918, 1 October 1918, Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. The Polder letters reveal that the Drost family was not the most sociable family. The story went that a visit with them was boring. The children had left Holland when they were young and entertained strange ideas about their native country. Rev. F.J. Drost had been a catechism teacher in the *Hervormde Kerk* and a teaching elder, when he joined Kuyper’s *Doleantie* in 1890 and the *Gereformeerde Kerk*. He accepted a call to Whitinsville, MA, in 1895 and led this independent congregation into the CRC, after which Classis Hudson admitted him as a full minister (*Yearbook CRC* 1929).

¹⁸ Letter, Leendert Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 10 August 1914, Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor van der Baan, 25 October 1914; Minutes CRC LA, 22 May 1918 and 1 October 1918. *50th Anniversary of the First Christian Reformed Church of Los Angeles, California* (n.p. [1964]), iv-xvii. “Korte geschiedenis van het ontstaan der Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk te Los Angeles California,” pages 4-6 in the first volume of the Minutes of the CRC LA.

¹⁹ Letter, Dirk and Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 3 August 1916. He used the book by J.H. Donner, *Kort Begrip van de goddelijke waarheden, ten dienste van het catechetisch onderwijs* (Leiden: Donner, 1901) and translated works by Matthew Henry and Charles H. Spurgeon. This saved the girls lengthy trips to Los Angeles for catechism classes at the church.

²⁰ Minutes CRC LA, 25 July 1916, 22 May and 16 October 1918.

²¹ Minutes CRC LA, 24 May 1920 and 4 August 1920.

²² Letter, Waander, Cornelia and Dirk Polder to Cor van der Baan, 16 July 1916 (Steelink family); Dirk and Cornelia to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 2 October 1916 and 15 May 1917.

²³ Minutes CRC LA, 16 June, 8 November, and 27 December 1920, 21 February and 18 April 1921.

²⁴ *Yearbooks CRC* (1914-1940).

²⁵ Minutes CRC LA, 15 July and 11 December 1922 and 17 September 1923.

²⁶ Minutes, 31 January and various data 1923. (19 March and 5 May 1924). With the death of Rev. J. Groen, the CRC lost one of its most remarkable and brilliant ministers (*Reformed Journal* March 1953). From 1927-1934 his son Watson Groen served the church. Minutes 28 May 1923, 26 November and 29 December 1924. Eventually the family members attended a Baptist Church, Diary Anton van der Baan, “Van Rotterdam naar Redlands,” (copy RSC), entry 14 August 1950. Leen was still a member of the Redlands Protestant Reformed Church, Jan and Waan were still CRC (as was Cor and Anton’s sons Tim and Tony who had emigrated to their relatives in California after World War II (see Diary Cor van der Baan, “Reis naar Californië,” 1959 copy RSC). Anna served as president of the choir and the ladies’ missionary society in Sun Valley Bethel CRC (a son was a deacon in this church). The continued to celebrate their birthdays with the extended family.

²⁷ Minutes CRC LA, 23 June and 21 July 1925. The only request that was granted was the cancellation of the choir.

²⁸ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor van der Baan, 5 August and 30 November 1925 (her son Leendert and his wife joined the RCA as well as her daughter Anna), she visited frequently, Anna van der Giessen to Cor van der Baan, 18 August 1925.

²⁹ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor van der Baan, 30 November 1931 and 24 March 1932.

³⁰ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 5 October 1932.

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- ³¹ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 25 November 1935. See the article of Trudy Selleck in this volume.
- ³² Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 24 April 1935.
- ³³ Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California Through the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 134.
- ³⁴ Letter, Dirk Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 24 March, 9 and 29 April 1919, 3 May 1921
- ³⁵ Letter, Cornelia and Dirk Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 25 January 1920.
- ³⁶ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 7 August 1928.
- ³⁷ Carey McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (1949; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 63-88.
- ³⁸ Starr, *Material Dreams*, 65-177.
- ³⁹ Letter, Dirk and Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 28 January 1915; Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 30 November 1921, 26 April 1926, 8 February, 10 July and 7 October 1929, 17 January 1931; Jacob Polder aan Cor and Anton van der Baan, 7 August 1928 and 11 October 1930.
- ⁴⁰ Starr, *Material Dreams*, 393.
- ⁴¹ Letter, Anna van der Giessen to Cor van der Baan, 10 July 1929.
- ⁴² *The Banner*, 14 June 1929; Letter, Leendert and Johanna Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 2 December 1919; Dirk and Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan 6 December 1919; Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan 6 October 1925 and 25 March 1926.
- ⁴³ In 1927 one out of three inhabitants of Los Angeles County owned a car, adding up to 560,000 cars and 76,000 trucks, while the eight million citizens in the Netherlands only had 68,000 cars in 1930 (1 for 117 people).
- ⁴⁴ Letter, Dirk and Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 2 and 24 October 1916, 5 November 1919.
- ⁴⁵ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 28 February 1922, 6 July 1926. Ironically, Cornelia described in the last preserved letter her meeting with a son of her old landlord Van der Ondermeulen, who had settled in Los Angeles (8 July 1941).
- ⁴⁶ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 14 October 1935.
- ⁴⁷ Letter, Cornelia and Dirk Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 16 March 1920
- ⁴⁸ Letter, Cornelia and Dirk Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 23 August and 22 November 1917; 3 and 28 October 1918; 14 August 1918; 14 May 1919.
- ⁴⁹ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 17 January 1931 and 15 March 1933.
- ⁵⁰ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor van der Baan, 2 August 1926.
- ⁵¹ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 25 February 1930; Cornelia Polder to Cor van der Baan, 25 August 1931.
- ⁵² Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor van der Baan, 6 January 1937.
- ⁵³ Letter, Cornelia Polder to Cor and Anton van der Baan, 10 May 1941.
- ⁵⁴ The essay of Trudy Selleck in this volume deals more extensively with this aspect.