

SUMMARY

Manu van der Aa, *'Love is what I have loved'. The life of Alice Nahon (1896-1933)*.

This study is a biography of the once famous and bestselling Flemish poet Alice Nahon (1896-1933). Her rise to fame began shortly after the publication of her first volume of poems, *Vondelingskens*, in 1920. At the same time she was mythologized, by her entourage (first and foremost by her father, who was also her publisher). Nahon herself – although sometimes a bit reluctantly – also contributed to her own myth, which depicted her as a sickly, melancholy, half-saintly young woman who wrote simple, touching and sincere poetry. However, that she was not a 'saint', as her entourage would have us believe, became apparent following the publications of, among others, Eric Defoort (1991) and Ria van den Brandt (1996). Nonetheless it was clear that more and thorough research was needed to straighten out some facts.

Based on such research, this book shows that Alice Nahon was far from a saint. TWEE MAAL DIT WOORD DICHT BIJ ELKAAR. She was a woman, who after having needlessly spent more than seven years in sanatoriums, grabbed her freedom and went in search of happiness. The story of her life is one of literary success and financial distress, of numerous love affairs and permanent health problems, of living to the full and dying young.

Alice Nahon met and knew quite a few important artists of her time, such as Michel Seuphor, Eddy du Perron and Gerard Walschap. She was also very close with a lot of influential people of the pro-Flemish Movement, part of which converted to the extremist right in the mid-1930's, turning Nahon into a 'flamingant' icon. STAAT DEZE TERM EN TOELICHTING OOK IN DE BOEK HIERVOOR. KIJK DAAR EVEN GOED NAAR although she herself was never inclined to any extremist action whatsoever. The love for Alice Nahon is still alive in Flemish nationalist circles, even

though it is clear now that she doesn't match the profile of the 'ideal Flemish woman', who is supposed to be innocent, tender, loving and above all 'serving'.

Dutch author Eddy du Perron once described Alice Nahon as 'a personality of the future with too much love for the common people'. By this he meant that Nahon behaved as a woman who was ahead of times but that in her poetry and as a public figure she did what the common people expected her to do. This book proves that Du Perron's observation was quite accurate.

TUSSENKOP?

Alice Marie Nahon was born on August the 23rd 1896 in Antwerp. Gerard L. Nahon, her father, was a rather stern Dutchman of Huguenot originALS JE DIT NIET HEBT UITGEZOCHT WEGLATEN who had once considered becoming a catholic priest but ultimately moved to Antwerp where he married and where he worked – from 1893 till his retirement – as the manager of De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, one of the major bookshops of the port town. Her mother, Julie Gysemans, was the daughter of a wealthy market-gardener from Putte, a village near Mechelen. She had studied to be a teacher of agriculture but never practised the profession. She was an unconventional, down-to-earth sort of woman, which helped her raise eleven children of whom Alice was third in line.

The continuously growing Nahon family moved house half a dozen times in and around Antwerp before settling down in the suburb Mortsels-Oude God, where they bought a house in 1902. After attending primary school in Oude God, Alice went to live with her godmother for a year. Mieke Gysemans, a cheerful and nature loving spinster, owned and hosted the tavern 'Het kasteeltje van Namen' in Putte (near Mechelen) and gave Alice the time of her life. In 1911 Alice was sent to the Institut du Sacré-Cœur, a boarding school in Overijse where she got a housecraft and agricultural certificate. Alice Nahon wrote her first poems here. These simple, amusing verses about school life were posthumously published in *Maart-April* (1936).

Immediately after leaving Overijse in August 1913, Nahon joined her elder sister Constance in the nursing school of Stuivenberg hospital in Antwerp. They were both boarders, which was strange as

the school didn't take many boarders and the Nahon sisters lived nearby. This is probably explained by the fact that Gerard Nahon was struggling to support his large family and that it suited him well that two of his daughters got free boarding (and even a small wage) as nurse students might be the explanation. Two remarkable things happened during Alice Nahon's stay in Stuivenberg. First she was swept off her feet by Anne Voeten, a charming head nurse who was about seven years her senior. This first romantic friendship, documented by previously unpublished poems, letters and a diary, would last for a few years. It seems Nahon had found a substitute for the missing parental love.

Secondly, the first signs of Nahon's poor health became apparent. In July 1914 she was out with bronchitis for a few weeks. A few weeks after the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, she fell seriously ill again. This time she was admitted in the clinical observation ward of Stuivenberg hospital. Alice even thought that she was going to die soon. But by the end of September she was sent home for convalescence. Unfortunately a clear diagnosis is missing, so we do not know the exact nature of her illness. On November 15th 1914 Alice Nahon was, for reasons of health, honourably discharged as a nurse from Stuivenberg hospital. These facts are important as they contradict the repeatedly told story that Alice Nahon helped to attend the casualties caused by the German bombardment of Antwerp in October 1914. She presumably did this in the cold, damp basement of Stuivenberg hospital and consequently caught the disease that in the long run would prove fatal.

When she had recovered, Nahon attended the lectures on Flemish literature by the influential writer Pol de Mont. Her father desperately wanted to get her admitted to a sanatorium. He wrote to the Bestuur van Burgerlijke Godshuizen (BBG) of Antwerp – a kind of welfare organisation – owner of Stuivenberg hospital and Nahon's employer when she fell ill, to remind them of their liability. The BBG sent a doctor to examine Alice and in March 1916 she was admitted to the Joostens sanatorium in Sint-Antonius as suffering from tuberculosis. It is not clear how the diagnosis was made but we know now with certainty that it was wrong. The BBG paid for all the expenses, which seems to have been her

father's main concern. However, Joostens was a sanatorium for men suffering from tuberculosis and Alice could only stay there exceptionally and for a short while. Nevertheless it lasted until June 1917 before Nahon moved to the Sint-Jozefgesticht in Tessenderlo, a small town in the province of Limburg. In Sint-Antonius Nahon had begun writing poetry again and, after some coaching by Pol de Mont and editing by Willem Gijssels, her first poem ('Mijn Poëzie') was published in the Flemish weekly *Vlaamsch Leven* in January 1917. By August 1918 ten of her poems would appear in this 'activist' magazine of which Willem Gijssels was the editor. Most of Nahon's early poetry was formally inspired by the famous priest-poet Guido Gezelle. Its content was romantic and oversentimental; her longing for love and a better, happier life was one of its recurring themes.

Contrary to what Alice Nahon later claimed, she wasn't that unhappy and lonesome in Tessenderlo. Although the institute was run by nuns who tried to keep the inmates on a short leash, Nahon made acquaintance with a lot of the townspeople and with some of the local writers, such as Minus van Looi, Constant Godelaine and Jef Leynen. Since *Vlaamsch Leven* had disappeared at the end of the war, Nahon was looking for other ways to get her work published. In Tessenderlo there was the weekly regional newspaper *Boerenbelang* that gladly accepted all of her work and in Antwerp she got access to the new pro-Flemish newspaper *De Schelde*. In July 1919 Pol de Mont, whom she knew well, had become the editor-in-chief of this paper and he unsolicitedly saw to it that she got a small fee for her contributions.

In July 1920 Nahon's first volume, *Vondelingskens*, appeared. It was an instant success: the critics (in Flanders as well as in Holland) wrote favourably about it. The public also fell for it and for its pretty author. By 1933, the year she died, the volume was reprinted 14 times (some 35.000 copies sold) – which is immense for the relatively small Dutch speaking market.

In the months following the publication of *Vondelingskens* Nahon became a celebrity in Flanders: she was asked to read her poems at student gatherings, her poems were put to music by well-known composers (as Arthur Meulemans and Flor Peeters) and her postcard picture was on sale in

bookstores. Despite her frequent illnesses, Nahon was a young girl with ravishing looks. She attracted the attention of quite a few writers and other artists who were not only interested in her writings. On the other hand, Nahon herself liked being courted. In 1921 she had a passionate relationship with the poet and journalist Paul Pée and at the same time with Fernand Berckelaers, who later became known as Michel Seuphor. Nahon gave him two of her poems to publish in *Het Overzicht*, the periodical he had founded with Geert Pynenburg, who would become a lifelong friend (and occasional lover) of Nahon. Both Pée and Seuphor had wanted to marry Alice Nahon at some point but she wouldn't commit herself, presumably because she still thought she would die soon.

After a few years of relatively stable health, Alice Nahon began to question the diagnosis of tuberculosis. Secret visits to other doctors confirmed her suspicions: she wasn't or was no longer affected by the often fatal disease. The doctor of the institute however stuck to his opinion and Nahon remained in the Sint-Jozefgesticht until the end of 1922.

In 1921 her second volume, *Op zachte voorzeken*, was published by De Nederlandsche Boekhandel and the Dutch co-publisher Sijthoff. It proved as successful as *Vondelingskens* even though some critics objected to the fact that the new volume was of the same tenor as the previous one.

Near the end of 1922 the Flemish writer Emmanuel de Bom and the Dutch author and clergyman H.G. Cannegieter made a public appeal to financially support Nahon. She would use the money to travel to Switzerland to find a cure for her illness. The public – the Dutch in particular – responded enthusiastically and in December 1922 Nahon could finally leave Tessenderlo.

In Luzern, doctor Franz Elmiger established once and for all that Nahon didn't suffer from tuberculosis but from chronic bronchitis. He recommended an extended stay in a warmer climate. And so Nahon travelled to the Italian Riviera and later to the French Landes where she settled down in the small town of Roquefort for about three months.

After her return, in the summer of 1923, from this uneventful stay in France, a period of wandering began. Until February 1927 Nahon lived in hotels, with friends or with anyone who would

have her in Flanders or Holland. During these years she didn't do much writing and hardly published in literary magazines, but her two volumes kept selling well. She also mingled with the literary crowd. Among the writers she came to know very well in this period were the Flemish novelist Gerard Walschap and the Dutch author Eddy du Perron, who would both become writers of foremost importance.

With Walschap she got acquainted through his fiancée, Marie-Antoinette Theunissen, whom she had already met in Tessenderlo. During the spring of 1924 Theunissen and Nahon spent some time in Ronheide (near Aachen) where they were treated – to little or no avail – by the Bohemian ‘doctor’ Gärtner, probably a quack. Walschap visited them a few times and was truly impressed by the frivolous and pleasant-looking poetess. The second half of the year Nahon lived in Brussels with the wealthy family of THE oncoming author E. du Perron. Nahon had met Du Perron in Antwerp where he was looking for a publisher for a modernist story he had written and ended up in the company of Nahon's former lover Fernand Berckelaers (or Seuphor). *Het Overzicht* had over the years evolved from a pro-Flemish magazine to a modernist periodical of (in hindsight) European stature. Obviously, Nahon's poetry no longer fitted the new profile. Nahon always regretted the fact that she had had too little of an education to understand the new kind of literature that writers such as Berckelaers or Du Perron produced. Du Perron later referred to Nahon in a few of his poems and used her as a model for the character Betsy in his story ‘Een tussen vijf’ (‘One among five’). Considering Du Perron's and Nahon's libertine inclinations it is remarkable that they never had a love-affair.

In the spring of 1925 Alice Nahon was taken in by the immensely rich Van Beuningens who owned an estate, Thedingsweert, near the Dutch town of Tiel. In June they brought Alice Nahon, whose health had again deteriorated, to the Boerhaavehospital in Amsterdam to be treated by the famous doctor Isidore Snapper. He succeeded in getting her better again and Nahon could return to Antwerp by the end of 1925. The generous travelling grant of 8.000 francs that Minister Camille Huysmans had given her in the summer now came in handy.

After a few short-lived love-affairs Nahon got seriously involved with the painter Lode Seghers, who was nine years her senior. They thought about getting married but the relationship turned out wrong when she discovered that he had cheated her out of a significant part of her travelling grant. Finally, it was agreed that he would pay her back in instalments.

Nahon was now well enough to consider getting a job and a place of her own. But it was a hard decision for which she didn't seem ready yet. In the meantime she stayed with the newly-wed Walschaps, with her godmother in Putte or at the Hotel du Chemin de Fer in Maaseik, which was run by two elder sisters of Marie-Antoinette Theunissen.

In 1926 an anthology, *Keurgedichten van Alice Nahon*, was published with an introduction by dr. C. Tazelaar. Modernist author Paul van Ostaijen, who had completely ignored Nahon's poetry so far, wrote a destructive review. He labelled Nahon's work as *Gartenlaube*-poetry, i.e. cadenced petty-bourgeois poetry loaded with sentimental stereotypes. In Holland poet and influential critic Martinus Nijhoff published an equally slashing review. However, Van Ostaijen's and Nijhoff's criticism didn't really affect Nahon's career at the time. It wasn't until the 1950s when Nahon's downfall set in that in particular Van Ostaijen's review produced a devastating effect. Although she still had quite a lot of admirers, literary people couldn't take her work serious anymore.

By the end of 1926 Nahon applied for a job as a librarian in Mechlin. In February 1927 she was appointed. Nahon moved to Mechlin and did a pretty good job in the library, even though she wasn't really qualified for it. She intended to take the exam for librarian but never got round to it. The tranquillity of the reading-room where she had her desk, brought her back to writing poetry. As a result her third volume, *Schaduw*, appeared in August 1928. The volume looked more modern than its predecessors, thanks to the erudite booklover Prosper Verheyden, who from now on acted as her personal advisor and assistant. But the modernist cover of *Schaduw* by Jos Léonard didn't match its traditional content. Compared to *Vondelingskens* and *Op zachte vooizekens* the critical appraisal of *Schaduw* was tepid. Nahon was disappointed and stopped writing and publishing.

At first Nahon didn't notice that Verheyden, a married man in his fifties, was in love with her. She herself had set her mind on Jef Leynen, the Limburger poet she knew from her days in Tessenderlo and who had come into her life again since she regularly stayed with Karel Gessler and his wife in Maaseik. Karel Gessler was an architect and a benefactor and friend of a lot of Flemish artists, among whom also Jef Leynen. Nahon really pursued the rather prudish Leynen – the only man who she wanted to marry herself. Finally, in January 1929, after a liquor-ridden night, he yielded to the temptation. Unfortunately for Nahon the guilt and shame were too much for this vulnerable and pious soul and he ended the affair for good.

Shortly after her break-up with Leynen Nahon fell ill again and during the following months she was more often on sick leave than on the job. In April 1930 she definitely quit working. On December 1st 1930 she was granted a pension of one fifth of her average wage. She left Mechlin and moved to the old chaplaincy of Cantecroy, a castle in Mortsel Oude-God, at the outskirts of Antwerp. The owner of the castle was doctor Arthur de Groot, who lived there with his eccentric wife Juliette Adant and their six children. De Groot and his wife regularly hosted gatherings of intellectuals from all over the world, among them Johan Huizinga, Rabindranath Tagore and Albert Einstein. But their main concern was the academic education of the Dutch-speaking Flemish youth and the promotion of Flemish culture. Hence their support for Alice Nahon, who could stay at Cantecroy for free.

At Cantecroy Nahon welcomed her old friends and acquaintances and made new friends such as composer Jef van Hoof, author Lode Zielens and French-speaking novelist Marie Gevers, who lived in a castle nearby. In these days the poetess also joined the first Belgian Soroptimist Club.

In January 1931 Nahon underwent major surgery and had to stay in hospital for several months. The nature of the operation is shrouded in mystery. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Nahon miscarried or that she had an, at the time illegal, abortion. Father of the presumed child could have been Prosper Verheyden, who had probably become Nahon's lover.

The last years of her life Nahon shared a fifth floor apartment in the Carnotstraat, close to Antwerp Central Station, with a young English girl, Sylvia Newton. They had met a few years before in Mechlin. Newton was 17 at the time but they already dreamed of living together then. But their dream soon ended when in November 1932 Nahon fell ill again. She had to stay in bed all day, feverish, short-breathed and suffering from bad coughing bouts. From a present-day medical point of view it is probable that Nahon's medical problems and eventual death were caused by a congenital heart condition.

During the final months of her life, Nahon worked on an edition of her collected poetry (which she never finished). Since 1928 she hadn't written much but she had remained a prominent figure in the literary scene in Flanders and Holland. She attended writers' meetings and gave numerous lectures. Nahon died on May 21st 1933 in her home in Antwerp before she could finish editing her poetry. In 1936 a volume of juvenile and uncollected poems appeared as *Maart-April*.