Summary

Nose in the air
Biography of Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart

Dr. Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart struggled all his life: against international disinterest to refugees, colonial conservatism in the Dutch East Indies, the German occupiers of The Netherlands, Dutch sentiments of revenge as a result of the Second World War. Furthermore, he struggled against Nazism, fascism, and against sectarian politics, especially by those politicians who appealed to feelings of Christian superiority. He opposed the distress of his first marriage and his father, whose choices appeared to be decisions that had ruined the family, in all respects.

Gerrit Jan Goedhart was born March 19, 1901 as the son of a bookseller, later vicar Goedhart. He was the second oldest in a family with four boys. In 1933 Gerrit Jan was the sole brother who chose to adopt his mother’s name ‘Van Heuven’, in order to distance himself from his father who he blamed to be negligent and selfish, both in his marriage and in the education of his children.

He studied Law at Leiden University, where he developed a growing sympathy for the struggle for independence in the Dutch East Indies. In addition, he became acquainted with the ideas of Hugo Grotius on international law. In both cases his professor C. van Vollenhoven played a crucial role; Van Heuven Goedhart would convey his entire life’s lessons.

After he graduated in 1925 he was employed by the newspaper De Telegraaf. Within one year he was included in the editorial board and in 1930 he became its chief editor. Because of a severe conflict with the newspaper’s owner, H.M.C. Holdert, he was dismissed in May 1933. Holdert accused him of not being able to stop the newspaper’s declining circulation; whereas Van Heuven Goedhart himself thought that his own opposition to the pro-Hitler stance of the editorial line was the true reason for his dismissal.

Between 1933 and 1940 he led the Utrechtsch Nieuwsblad. As the chief editor he managed to improve the circulation and the prestige of this regional daily
newspaper, while he also profiled the *Utrechtsch Nieuwsblad* to become one of the most anti-Nazi newspapers in The Netherlands. Besides his work as the chief editor Van Heuven Goedhart became a fierce opponent of Nazism, anti-Semitism and resentment against refugees. He did so in many organizations and movements.

His activism was the reason for his immediate resignation from the *Utrechtsch Nieuwsblad* on the day of capitulation of the Dutch Army to Nazi-Germany in May 1940. As an unemployed journalist, he joined a resistance movement, whose first aim was to get radio contact with the Dutch government in exile in London. This resistance group, which operated under the name of the legal *Grebbecommissie*, had quickly grown into a movement that opposed the German occupiers, but whose members also worked on ideas for a renewed and reviled post-war Netherlands.

These thoughts on the Dutch future were published in *Het Parool*, an illegal magazine founded in the summer of 1940 as the *Nieuwsbrief van Pieter ’t Hoen*. Van Heuven Goedhart became its leader from late 1942 onwards. *Het Parool* was part of a progressive wing within the divided Dutch resistance movement. It rejected the pre-war political relations, which were marked by stagnation and polarisation. Van Heuven Goedhart and his comrades were strongly in favour of a new democratic order, without political blocs.

In April 1944 Van Heuven Goedhart was searched by the Germans and was not able to work and move around freely any longer. In a dangerous escape, he fled via France and Spain to London where he was to bring information to the Dutch government in exile.

Almost immediately after arriving in London in July 1944, he was asked to become Minister of Justice in the second cabinet Gerbrandy. As a minister he witnessed the liberation of southern part of The Netherlands in September of that year, but in his attempts to restore the rule of law he was confronted with a strong opposition by former resistance movements, since these resistance movements were included in the Dutch Armed Forces, established by the Dutch government to maintain order in liberated Holland.

At the root of the conflict laid the question who had authority to arrest Dutch citizens whom had collaborated with the Germans. This was a major issue, on which the government of Prime Minister Gerbrandy was deeply divided. As a result Queen Wilhelmina wished the ministers to be replaced by candidates from the liberated south of the country and reshuffled the cabinet. Van Heuven Goedhart was not asked again to join the newly formed government in February 1945.

After the capitulation of Germany, he returned to The Netherlands. His desire for rehabilitation in a position at the public administration was, however, ignored. In September 1945 he accepted the urgent request of *Het Parool* to become its chief editor.
In *Het Parool* he led the opposition against the policies of the Dutch Government to refuse the Dutch East Indies independence. He later became a senator of the newly formed Partij van de Arbeid (Labour Party) because he hoped that his ideas on the renewal of Dutch politics, which he had developed during the Second World War, could be achieved. This was to be another disappointment; the resistance of the Labour Party – one of the ruling parties since 1946 – against the independence of Indonesia was the most distressing example.

His transfer in 1951 as chief editor of *Het Parool* to the appointment as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was remarkable but not surprising. Under his leadership, *Het Parool* had grown to become one of the most successful newspapers in the Netherlands, with a daily circulation of nearly 150,000. But Van Heuven Goedhart’s ambitions had been on a political platform ever since he had become minister during the War. From 1947 onwards he had been asked for several short term positions in the international circuit, often similar to his profession as a journalist. His appointment as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was therefore not very surprising. The importance of this function should be put into perspective: it was a newly created position with a mandate of only three years, caring for one last ‘remnant’ refugees of the Second World War, an annual budget of $300,000 and a staff of 30 men, housed on the top floor of the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

Five years and a new mandate later much had changed for Van Heuven Goedhart. The organisation now cared about over two million refugees; the Geneva Convention had been written, there was an agreed budget of sixteen million, the number of staff employed grew threefold and was housed in twelve offices all over the world. Van Heuven Goedhart laid the foundations for the later development of the refugee organisation, which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1954.

However, Van Heuven Goedhart refused to saw or to accept these results. He used mottos such as: ‘Keep up at’, ‘Nose in the air’, and ‘Forward Fatherland’ because he needed those self invented wisdoms for his own courage, giving him the strength to fight back. “I feel like a merchant in human capital”, so he characterized himself and his work as High Commissioner. For him it did not count what he had achieved, he only had eye for what was not yet realised. On Sunday, July 8, 1956 he died suddenly of a cerebral haemorrhage during his daily game of tennis, in his home town of Geneva. Van Heuven Goedhart, only 55 years young, had a wife and two daughters.