

Parting Shot: Patriot dreams of a Dutch family settling in America

By **Pia de Jong** - February 27, 2017

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It seemed like a great idea, to move from Amsterdam to another continent. My children would gain experience on the other side of the Atlantic, learn another language, taste another culture. But when I first heard my daughter sing “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” something unexpected happened to me.

It was four years ago, during her first Back-to-School Night at John Witherspoon Middle School. We, her parents, received a neat, handwritten letter inviting us to attend an entire school day in miniature — we would visit all her classes, in fast-forward, and meet all her teachers.

So surrounded by hundreds of parents, we raced at breakneck speed to a math class with a picture of Einstein on the wall, then went on to a history class, where we sat in a mini-Louvre between an Egyptian sarcophagus and several statues of Chinese knights. At the end of the evening came the big surprise about which my daughter had been conspicuously silent for days: the school choir would perform.

Curious, we sat in the auditorium. Then she walked on stage, my pre-teenie with her braces and skinny legs. The audience was hushed, then it began.

The song was “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” also called “America.” Oh, I knew that song. I remember the television images back from President Obama’s first inauguration. Aretha Franklin sang her soul out of her body while everyone got goose bumps.

In my Dutch view, though, “‘Tis of Thee” is a shamelessly patriotic song that grinds along with the same tear-jerking melody as “God Save the Queen.” There are, as with most patriotic songs, endless choruses driving home the single message that this country is the best of all countries. The words of the first verse, which my daughter sang, states:

*“Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrims’ pride,
From ev’ry mountainside
Let freedom ring.”*

Now it was my turn for goosebumps. This was not the land where her fathers died. Her grandfather, my own dear

father, had died just the year before ... not in America but in the Netherlands. Where there definitely are no mountainsides.

“Do you know who the pilgrims are?” I asked as she brushed her teeth that night. “Yes,” she said. She proudly showed me her American history book. A colossus of at least 20 pounds. New Jersey state law requires that every child takes this course. She opened the first page. ‘The Pilgrim Fathers ...’ I read. So much for the land of her fathers.

When we left, everyone in Holland had reassured us that our kids will have made the adjustment to the U.S.A. by Christmas. My daughter was halfway through her second week of school.

Moments later, she stands in her pajamas next to her bed. Her face is pale, she is so tired. “Did you like to see my school?” she asks.

“I loved it,” I say. “And you sang so beautifully.”

“Shall I sing it again?” she asks hopefully.

“I think it’s better that you get some sleep,” I say.

“Tomorrow you have to be up early for school.”

Silently she lies down.

“I have one more question,” I say. “Are you doing that thing with the flag every morning?”

“Oh, yes!” she says cheerfully. “Every morning we hear Mr. Ingersoll announce it through the intercom. Now all rise,” he says.

“And then?” I ask.

“Wait, I will show you,” she says. She jumps from her bed, stands up, and solemnly says, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America ...”

“Do you really say that?” I ask.

“Of course,” she says. “It would be weird to not do that.”

She lies down again. Just when I think she is falling asleep, she adds, “But I don’t put my hand on my heart like the other kids do. That would be weird. After all, this is not my country.”

At least not yet.

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