

History of *The Hormone Factory*

In the course of doing the research for my first novel, *Obligatory Happy, Portrait of a Family*, in the National Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) in Amsterdam, I stumbled across an article in German in the file on Professor Laqueur. It gave a detailed account of how the Jewish director of the hormone factory Organon was reputedly guilty of sexual attacks on the factory girls on an extensive scale. This was apparently publicly known in Oss, but because the majority of the inhabitants were dependent on the factory for employment, no one dared to intervene. The article quoted at length from several newspaper articles in *De Telegraaf* and *Nationaal Dagblad*, which recounted how not only was the director guilty of these offences, but also that Professor Laqueur, co-owner of Organon, was aware of these assaults and hadn't interfered. Although the tone of the article was clearly anti-Semitic, nonetheless it roused my interest and I wondered to what extent these accusations had a basis in truth.

After the publication of *Obligatory Happy*, I continued my research. It soon became clear to me that the story of the founding of Organon is unique and exciting, taking place at a time when one important discovery after another was being made. The hunt for hormones was in full swing worldwide. The owners of the Van Zwanenberg slaughter and meat factories, a well-known company already operating internationally, were the first industrialists in the Netherlands to seek a close collaboration with science. They approached the famous pharmacologist Professor Laqueur and the outcome was the start of a company that grew to be one of the country's multinationals.

Organon was founded in 1923 and was a vigorous participant in the race to be the first to extract hormones. This was the time of the so-called 'hormone bubble': in labs all over the world scientists worked hard to isolate hormones from organs, to standardise them and to discover for

Timeline

1887 Zwanenberg Slaughterhouse and Factories is founded in Oss (provincial town in the south of Holland) by the twin brothers Van Zwanenberg

1923 Saal van Zwanenberg establishes Organon to develop new medicine from meat waste

1925 Chemists Ernst Laqueur and Jacques van Oss join Zwanenberg at Organon

1930 Organon starts a series of successful discoveries. They have international success with applying hormones in medicine, leading to the birth of the contraceptive pill

1938 One of the brothers is sentenced to prison for sexual abuse of one of the employees and will not survive deportation to Auschwitz

1945 The other brother returns from England after WWII to continue his successes as businessman and benefactor

2012 Saskia Goldschmidt was inspired by the story of the twin brothers to write the novel *The Hormone Factory*

which functions of the body they were responsible. Experimenting with medical preparations was not yet governed by regulations, and the ethics concerning testing on animals and human beings was left to the scientist in question and to his conscience. The tension between the interests of science and those of commerce played an important role in the whole process and it is still a topical subject.

I became curious about the men who'd committed themselves so fanatically to this cause. They were without a doubt ambitious people, passionate, wanting to take humankind to a higher level through their inventions and were willing to sacrifice practically everything to be the best, to be controversial, to not be forgotten. What were the relations like between these men? How were they balanced? Up to what point did their interests coincide and where did they diverge?

I requested permission to continue my research in the company archive of Organon, now part of the American company MSD but still based in Oss. Because my research was focused mostly on the period 1923–45, it was granted and I was allowed to study all the minutes of the meetings of the board of directors, the correspondence between the directors, correspondence with clients and subsidiary companies, the personnel files, company films, reports of festivities and photo archives. After weeks of researching, reading and watching, speaking with the locals and the company's archivist, the possible outline of a book had formed.

To begin with, there was the matter of the brothers who were the directors of the slaughter and meat factories. One of them, S.v.Z., struck me, based on the sources, as very ambitious. He was the one who looked for a scientist with whom he could start a hormone factory. Together with the professor, he put his heart and soul into building that company; they were the first to produce hormone preparations on an industrial scale and they discovered the male hormone testosterone. At the time of the Occupation of the Netherlands in 1940, S.v.Z. miraculously managed to flee the country, and to this day he is considered to be the *pater familias* of Organon, the man the city owes a lot to, the simple boy who with only three years of secondary schooling managed to become a captain of industry, a knight of the Order of Orange-Nassau and to be awarded an endowed professorship.

The other brother appeared to be his opposite. It was he who was convicted to two years in prison for the sexual abuse of several under-age employees. I found and was allowed to consult the shocking court report, where his practices were recounted in detail, in the Brabant Historic Information Centre (BHIC). A year and a half after his release in 1940 he was killed in Auschwitz.

The picture of the brothers that these sources provide us is a mythical one and full of drama. The contrast between them, the exemplary one and the bad one, the successful one and the loser, couldn't possibly be any greater. The reality that the archives sketched was so black and white that I began to question it. History is often reduced to simple truths that are easy to comprehend; it is a universal human urge to look over our shoulder at what lies behind us and to attempt to determine what is good and what is evil. In my opinion, this was a far too simple depiction of the truth and it inspired me to write another version of reality, one in which the relationship between the brothers and their very different lives gained a new dimension. This invented story of what could have happened offers an alternative perspective on the two brothers, less black and white, a story in which good and evil are not so easy to distinguish from each other.

It also became clear to me from the archives how the once so inspiring collaboration between the businessman and the scientist degenerated over the years into a bitter fight. By the end, the two men, both prominent and active in the company, wouldn't give each other the time of the day. Two leaders in one house leads to much fuss about nothing and eventually it goes wrong. After the war the businessman saw his chance to deny the scientist further access to the company and he did not hesitate to take it. That too intrigued me: how does a man justify to himself betraying the person to whom he owes so much success just because it suits him to do so?

Then there is of course the matter of the high social standing of both the businessman and the scientist. To succeed either in commerce or in science, one has to take great risks; both financially and experimentally, one must bluff and continuously outwit others. How does that relate to the risks to the safety of others of the research one does? When a man talks his way through life and achieves the greatest successes in that manner, does that give him privileges others cannot stake claim to? Also, why are successful men often so incredibly careless when it comes to sex? Why are they prepared to risk their entire career for a brief sexual encounter?

When I was thinking about the themes for *The Hormone Factory*, the Dominique Strauss-Kahn affair was all over the media. The endless articles on the fallen prince of the IMF and the interviews with him were proof that successful powerful men like Strauss-Kahn often grant themselves extraordinary privileges and do not consider having sexual relations with a girl who did not give her consent as abuse or rape. They appear to live under the illusion that a simple girl should consider it an honour when a powerful man sleeps with her, whether she is willing or not.

Strauss-Kahn actually said in an interview (a statement I borrowed for my protagonist) that ‘it is the eyes that tell me when a girl is willing’.

In brief, the relatively factual history of the triumphant rise of a Dutch company that became a worldwide success combined with the imagined personal histories of the men who made that possible are the ingredients of *The Hormone Factory*; a fictional tale inspired by the history of the founding of Organon. The novel explores the mindset of the men who contributed to progress and science: how they trod the thin line between servility and power, between scientific research and personal satisfaction, between the possibilities of progress and the limitations of the human mind. The form I selected is that of the protagonist lying on his deathbed looking back on his life. Because that is the moment when there is a reckoning for the life a person has lived. Because that is perhaps the first time you can answer the question: have I been a decent human being?

Saskia Goldschmidt
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