

Netherlands

Evelien Roels interviewed **Cees Nootboom**.

Interview date: February 2020

Roels: This is the interview with Mister Nootboom. We will start with a short introduction.

Nootboom: Very well. Mister Nootboom was born in 1933, the year Hitler came to power in this part of the world. The first words I may have heard in a different language were in Latin. That was when I got baptized, since that used to be performed in Latin; now it's done in Dutch. The most - I think - significant experience that I clearly remember, and because of which I don't remember much of what happened before, is May 10, 1940, when the airfield behind our house in The Hague-Rijswijk was attacked by German planes, and paratroopers came down. At the same time, those were the days when Rotterdam, which we could see on the horizon, was on fire. Those are really the things that remain unforgettable for me. I also feel, because I'm an author and for an author those very first years are important, that those years have partly been taken away, since I remember so little. Superstition or not, I believe much has been wiped out by that terrible noise of May 10, 1940. I absolutely cannot prove that, except that I have very few childhood memories of my early youth.

Roels: All right. Shall I introduce myself to the audience very briefly? My name is Evelien Roels. I was born in March 1989, before the fall of the wall, and have lived in Heidelberg, Amsterdam and Rome.

It is a great pleasure to talk to you now about your experiences with Europe. The first question I wanted to ask you is a very broad one. You have just told us about the German invasion in 1940. What was the first time you came into contact with Europe or heard about the idea of Europe for the first time? Was that already during the war years?

Nootboom: I don't think so. I might have heard some slogans on the radio, "Germany winning on all fronts", the sound of Hitler's voice, that screaming of his, the clandestine [Dutch] radio, Free Orange or whatever it was called...at some point, about twelve years old, I became a boarder at what is to all effects a very European institution, a monastery school, inside a monastery. That school was called – now it gets tough, but [laughs] it had a Latin name – *Beatae Mariae Virginis* [i.e. "of the Blessed Virgin Mary"]¹ operated by Franciscans in

¹ The full name is *Gymnasium Immaculatae Conceptionis Beatae Mariae Virginis*, "Gymnasium of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary".

Venray, in the south of the Netherlands. I was not a success there. In fact, I wasn't a success anywhere – probably because of everything that had happened: divorced parents, the war, my mother who married a very Catholic man in 1948, after my father had died in February '45 in the bombing of the Bezuidenhout [neighbourhood] in The Hague. I wasn't there when he died. They were already divorced and my mother lived somewhere on the Veluwe [forest-rich area ca. 50 km. east of Amsterdam]. My father had sent me there during the winter of starvation of '44 because there was food over there; in The Hague there wasn't any food and people were starving. Therefore I heard about my father's death in Barneveld, on the Veluwe. That makes for a lot of changes already, and this is only up to '45.

After the liberation we went to my grandfather in the south of the Netherlands. I do remember the liberation. We were liberated by the Canadians in that place where we were living at the time, and most of all I remember that I could sit up front on the motorcycle of one of those Canadians. That was all wonderful. But chaos has held sway over my life quite a lot, changing residence again and again. To explain that I have to make a jump forward in time to much later. I've become an author and there is an exhibition at the Literary Museum in The Hague on my life and work, as it was called with slight exaggeration. A staff member of the museum came up to me with a piece of paper and said: "Did you know that your family, your mother, moved eight times in the years after 1944?" So I went to my mother, since I obviously don't remember that so well, and asked her if that was right. My mother said: "Absolutely not!" But the staff member had it on a piece of paper and it listed eight different addresses, so my mother had to admit it. It had to do with the fact that during the war, apparently, they had rented a house and were short on enough money and had to move from one house to another, something like that. That of course creates chaos.

Roels: Yes.

Nooteboom: Some of that chaos did actually remain through my years in school, first at a lyceum in Tilburg, then at the boarding school operated by those monks. At a boarding school like this I was certainly different from the average Catholic boy coming from a normal family of non-divorced parents. That made me a weird and unruly little fellow. The monks couldn't handle that and sent me away. I ended up with the next [monastic] order, of the Augustinians, quite a different intellectual level from those Franciscans. In my memory, it was all wonderful. Except that it [i.e. the school term] always took long, because we only had three holidays a year, which easily made you spent three months in a row in such a monastery school if you were a boarder.

Roels: Three months in a row?

Nooteboom: Yes, and then again for Easter holidays, Christmas holidays, Summer holidays. There too I ended up being the odd one out, an outsider or whatever you call it. There was something going on with a girl outside the

monastery walls, nothing really, but reason enough for those monks to say “well, this one can go”. So I left and spent another year at a lyceum [grammar school] in Hilversum.

All that mattered to me, funnily enough, was Latin and Greek, since I was no good at mathematics. Somehow that worked out and I had good grades for that, if I remember well, also for modern languages. So that's that part.

My mother, meanwhile, got married to a very Catholic man of whom I don't have bad memories, but that didn't fit at all, because that man had never been married and had lived with his mother until the age of 59. So well, yes [laughs], that was a very awkward situation. My mother once wrote it all down, with the urgent request to destroy it after reading. I've read it, and haven't destroyed it yet, but will certainly do so. But that gives me an insight into all that happened in those years. So on the one hand an archetypical, let's say – well, you cannot say archetypically European, but at least a very proper education, and on the other hand all the accompanying chaos that came with war and divorce and parental history. In the end I never finished grammar school and started working in a, to say the least, really quite subservient position at a bank.

Roels: If I may ask a bit more about your education: you said it was not an archetypically European type of education?

Nooteboom: Well, a classical education, I would say, based on Latin and Greek. Sadly I missed out on most of it because of the chaos, very much to my later regret. Not to apologize, but just a fact. I think of myself as possessing reasonable intelligence and hence someone capable of mastering it all, were it not for that chaos. And maybe – but I don't want to blame someone else, let alone those people I don't even know anymore – maybe a good teacher might have been able to discern that I could have handled that basic level of algebra and geometry, although I had no instinct for mathematics. I felt really bad about that my entire life; you never catch up, or at least I didn't, let's put it that way. I had to survive on my own from the age of seventeen, because I had left the house and didn't have anything, so then I worked.

Roels: What language education did you get at school?

Nooteboom: French, German, English, Latin and Greek.

Roels: Okay, so from my perspective: were there any school trips abroad or to Germany, any exchange programs?

Nooteboom: No, that did not exist at all. No, I did all that by myself. There was this moment when, I believe, some aunt gave me a little money, and we're talking about a relatively minimal amount, but I went hitchhiking through Europe.

Roels: Was that your first time abroad?

Nooteboom: No, I still remember my first time. That was when I went to Belgium by bicycle, and first started to think about what a border actually is. I found that so very peculiar: here's a field, let's say, and there is another field, but then there is this border in between. In the first town I came to, the newspaper was a different newspaper from the one at home, even though Belgium is not even very special, because it is still in Dutch, but the king is a different king. That much already dawned on me, and a completely different way of being, of people.

Roels: Were the borders open back then? Were there any border posts?

Nooteboom: Well, I could pass by bicycle, I don't remember that as a problem, coming from Brabant. Actually I ended up going all the way to Luxembourg. Then you first hear another language, a truly different one: so that was that, quite an adventure. I must have been, well, small – let's say, maybe sixteen or something? I still have a little diary of that period, quite silly in a way, but it tells me exactly how old I was. But it must have been something like that. Good.

Roels: But what was the experience like in Luxembourg, for example, with another language, not French or German, that you had at school?

Nooteboom: I don't even think I already had so much language awareness that I noticed what a peculiar [laughs] language they have there. I know that now. That weird mix of German and French and what they call Lëtzebuergesch. Anyway, I remember thinking about what borders are: that you can't see them, that you pass through something invisible, but something is essentially different. I remember realizing that much, at the time.

Roels: How do you feel about borders now? You are now in a Europe where borders are indeed on the map, but with open borders you can go from one country to another just like that, also by train.

Nooteboom: Well, others will never experience that the way we did, because it is now perfectly normal for you guys to go to France, or to move around within the Schengen area. That has of course made things a lot easier, as well as the omnipresence of English. That wasn't the case either. Languages always interested me a lot. When I went hitchhiking in France I noticed this, in what was one of my fundamental European experiences. Some of those things might be in that booklet [i.e. C. Nooteboom, *Wie wird man Europäer?* (1993)²], but anyway. I had heard that it would be cheaper in Paris to use a *carnet de metro* [i.e. pack of subway tickets] instead of single tickets. I had absolutely no money so I got myself a *carnet*, that's ten tickets. So there was this man called the *poignonneur*, a job that no longer exists. He grabbed the whole thing of ten tickets and went right through all ten at once, boom.

Roels: For one ride?

² a collection of official speeches partially published before, appearing both in Dutch (*De ontvoering van Europa*) and in a German translation

Nooteboom: Just an asshole. Anyway, I noticed at that very moment that I couldn't react to that adequately, since I started out with 'mais monsieur' ["But mister..."] and he said... well, I don't remember, there was this term of abuse, *connard* or something – you never know what is later construction when digging up memories, especially from so long ago. Whatever it was, I do remember my sentiments at the time: I will learn to speak this language, so this will never happens to me again and I will always be able to respond. And so I did, by hitchhiking with those fellows [i.e. truck drivers]. That always worked out in France back then, without those big *autoroutes* ["motorways"], hitchhiking was much more feasible. Nowadays it's really sad with the *autoroute*, people standing at those intersections or at those stations; really, we just used to stand along streets and roads, in France there were still so many simple highways. It was always about where they [i.e. the truck drivers] were going to eat, and that taught me why that [i.e. eating] is so important to the French.

It also taught me French very well, and French behaviour [imitates French], which really helped me a lot when I went back to Paris later on, still without any money. The French, especially in Paris, can be very nasty against foreigners: now I was able to get the best of them. Not so much by speaking that language incredibly well, but by knowing the method of how to react [imitates French]. Those French use such an enormous amount of sounds [laughs] very annoying, in a way, not like anything in England. I mean, people have their discourses, and of course someone may use stopgaps, but the French use sounds [imitates French sounds].

Roels: [laughs] Like Italians speak with gestures.

Nooteboom: Also, yes. But I learned an awful lot there and kept on doing that later, in Spain. I learned Spanish and speak it quite well: never had it in school, I just learned it on the street. That's not to say my Spanish is perfect, but I can write a letter in Spanish – I'd rather not, but I can do it. I also read the Spanish newspapers and that was very helpful, especially in Latin America. But that's a lot later.

Roels: Were there many hitchhikers on the road in those days?

Nooteboom: Yes, quite a lot. You also had competition, of course, of the others standing there too, and then you had to go somewhere else. And I got to know all kinds of people, some for quite a while. You hitchhiked alone or hitchhiked with someone else, later on. When I received my honorary doctorate in England [in 2019 by the University College London]³ I told them how essential that is - I really don't understand the English, not wanting to learn other languages because they simply don't have to. They end up everywhere, but of course you really miss something. Languages are such a joy – here too, with German.

³ Nooteboom was awarded an honorary degree by University College London in September 2019, on the occasion of which he gave a lecture.

German is not easy, I find, but I just speak normal German; I gave an incredible amount of talks in Germany.

There is one other thing, and that is not a matter of personal merit: I always call it *le don de l'imitation* ["the gift of imitation"], being able to imitate someone. For example – I had to think of it this morning – I was very well acquainted with Mary McCarthy, the [American] author. Her French was perfect. She lived in Paris. But her accent was not to be missed, really [laughs], and she had written a beautiful book about Venice. I remember one anecdote, of which she was very fond herself. It went like this: (*speaks a mixture of Italian and French with a heavy American accent*: “*Si lei pensate, che lei povete tromper an old American lady, lei lei trompete*”) [“If you think you can fool an old American lady, you’re fooling yourself”]. Well, you get it [laughs]. In a French restaurant she knew everything about food, was an absolute connoisseur, but I always noticed that the French were cringing at her *je voudrais* [“I would like”] (pronounced with a heavy American accent). And then it all came. She was a very good customer, of course; her husband was a diplomat and they had the money to dine in those restaurants with stars. We did that a lot, also in Italy, but there always was that accent. Southerners, also Italians, take that differently, but the French were really cringing [laughs].

Roels: What were your expectations when you started hitchhiking? Did you have a particular reason to do so, or did you want to get away?

Noteboom: I don't know what you call such a thing, but I think I went by intuition, instinct: just going away. That has always remained that way, also later on. I've travelled an awful lot: no longer hitchhiking, of course, in recent years.

Talking about Spanish, I've been invited several times to [literary] festivals like the Hay festival, which is English, but it [Hay festival] also exists in Latin America. So in recent years I went to Peru, Colombia, Argentina, Chile. I just go along with the others there, and also speak in Spanish at conference like this, all thanks to those years long ago, to the hitchhiking. That's also what I tried to tell those students then [i.e. during the lecture in London in 2019]. Look: of course, most people have to finish their studies. But that's exactly it: I didn't. What fascinated or fascinates me when I think of the Netherlands, but that's only the Dutch context: look at Hugo Claus, in Belgium, Harry Mulisch, Remco Campert⁴...none of them studied. Now we are suddenly dealing with critics who all studied Dutch or whatever, Literature - I always smell that.

Roels: The snobbery, you mean?

Nooteboom: No, no, no, I don't think that's snobbery. They're just like, well, almost a different species, who didn't have to discover all that for themselves,

⁴ prominent authors in the second half of the 20th century.

it was imposed on them. There is less freedom in their internal *make-up* [English in the original].

Roels: Nowadays there is a very strong expectation that people study at university after secondary school. How was that back then, was that an option?

Nooteboom: Well, I believe everyone who attended a grammar school like this was supposed to go to university, in terms of social class. But my father was already dead for a long time, of course that makes a big difference. A son without a father is different from a son with a father, and of course it strongly depends on the father as well. In general, something is just not there, and that keeps on being the case all your life, in my experience. My mother was full of ambition for me and she got me into those grammar schools. She had to – well, it was all different after the war. No money, and my father's family. Anyway, that is rather personal, I don't really feel like it now. It was a *well-to-do* [English in the original] family. But what we're touching upon now, I want to tell you about it, but not for this [interview]. Is that possible?

Roles: Yes, no problem.

Nooteboom: Look, my father, from a textile family in Brabant, was married to a French woman, who had become a Catholic because of him.

Roels: Do you want me to switch off the recorder?

Nooteboom: Yes, this is just for you.

Roels: I'd say we move on to another subject: your first job, you already mentioned it. Can you tell a bit about that? What was your first job?

Nooteboom: I only remember one thing, really, something very stupid called 'graduating the interest'. It had something to do with numbers and I know little about it, to say the truth. It didn't last very long either. My very first job was in some office I really don't know anything about any more. I was the entire staff: it was a very small company owned by some gentleman who had me as his employee.

Roels: Where was that, exactly?

Nooteboom: In Hilversum. The man my mother married to was not from a poor background. They had a very nice house in Hilversum and I was, well, let's say for convenience sake that I was an unruly child, perhaps. I didn't dislike that man, but it was all very weird, very Catholic, and of course I hadn't really been raised as a Catholic: at those boarding schools, yes, but that was only after that. But in 1948, a man who has lived with his mother almost until the age of 60, what's he going to do with three children? So, anyway, from one boarding school that other boarding school, then on to the lyceum in Hilversum; one way or another it never worked out. Then I just decided I'd better go. I think I earned 120 guilders and the pension I had was 95 guilders (*laughing*).

In retrospect you see things much clearer than back then, but when I worked at the bank there was a gentleman, he had something artistic about him. I remember that, as staff, we thought he was a great womanizer, but it was quite the opposite: he had all kinds of female, musical friends. He played the piano and a lady the violin. But anyway, he recognised something in me, of something more than just an ordinary clerk, and took me with him to the theatre. I still remember that I came out of the theatre, the Stadsschouwburg [i.e. "City theatre"] in Amsterdam, with this gentleman and I said to him: "In fifty years' time a play of mine will be performed here". Well, that stirred up some generous laughter. But it wasn't fifty years. It was ten years later, I wrote a play, and we don't have to discuss the quality, but it was performed in the Amsterdam Stadsschouwburg. The play was called *The Swans of the Thames* [Dutch title: *De zwanen van de Theems*] and, all I want to say, it brought me somewhere I wouldn't have gone otherwise. It wasn't a big thing, a friendship or anything, but it made me get a smell of an environment that I would end up in later, almost naturally.

Roels: Did you start writing at that point or had you started before?

Nooteboom: I think I wrote poems already. But let's see, now that we're talking about age... Well, at the bank: 17, 18, 19. Then hitchhiking. Then starting to write some things. A lot of that is gone, I must say, but when I turn 21, in 1954 – I'm from '33, so in 1954 – I write *Philip and the others* [Dutch title: *Philip en de anderen*], and suddenly everything changes completely. You get to know a few people. You are an author, because your name is on a book. But there was still no money. I did make some money with it, but I was still working at an advertising agency. I never regretted that. You're not supposed to approve of that, but that's another way of working with language.

Pretty soon after that book – I don't know when exactly, but a few years later in any case – I was already writing for 't Vrije Volk or Parool [i.e. Amsterdam-based newspapers]. In 1956, two photographers called me: "We're going to Budapest, because there is revolution. Would you like to come?" I have to tell you, my attitude has always been to say "Yes, will do!" – I'm not a person to say "No, well, but then we first need this or that". Going for it right away. That turned out to be an extremely influential European experience. But I also have to tell you, lest I forget, about my first great trip hitchhiking, to Sweden, after the first time in Paris. Going to Sweden meant passing through Germany. That country was totally devastated. I've always remembered it that way. I'm not good at dates, by the way. But a devastated Germany, eerie. Imagine, a fair share of the male population was gone, interred in Russia or dead. After that I first hitchhiked to Italy. The light, exactly.

Roels: Was that your first time in the Mediterranean world?

Nooteboom: Yes, and that is in part still my territory, of course, as I live in Spain during summer. The difference between Italy and France, and Spain is

curious, up to this day. I watch the Spanish news every night; in my opinion Spain is currently a disaster. So stupid.

Roels: In terms of politics, you mean?

Nooteboom: Yes, certainly in terms of politics. Of course it is a country that consists of many countries, but they're really making a mess out of it there at the moment; intensely sad. It ... it is as though they cannot do without an adversary, and they define themselves in relation to that adversary. Now we're digressing, right?

Roels: Yes, we are [laughs].

Nooteboom: Watch it. But let me stick to Italy. For me, that was the revelation.

Roels: Revelation in the sense of..?

Nooteboom: Difference. A different way of life [imitates Italian sounds].

Roels: Did you have expectations of Italy, also because of your classical training, the Greek and Latin?

Nooteboom: No, I don't think so. You always have to be careful not to exaggerate, and *you* [laughs] should perhaps be careful not to be steering. No, I think I had a bit more of an understanding of the language because of Latin and would have been able to learn Italian easily, if I hadn't ended up in Spain the following year and totally surrendered myself to Spain for a certain period. It is also a Latin language, but a fundamentally different one. Besides, I do speak Italian. I mean, I usually understand it when they speak it. I've given talks there as well; in English, but if I'm being asked questions in Italian, in an interview, I don't need an interpreter and can just answer in English. In that respect I more or less understood it. I also had a brother who lived in Italy, a younger brother, but he's dead, he died this year. So to recapitulate, I remember my Italian experience as feeling like: this is how it should be, this is how one should live.

Added to that there was also Rome, the Vatican. How I did all that? Heaven knows. Think about it: where does one spend the night? I used to sleep along the street. I remember this one thing, a truly European experience. I was by myself, a very slender little fellow. I used to weigh 50 kilos. I remember seeing a shed somewhere along the road and thinking: this is where I'll spend the night. It was in the hills, and there was a boat in that shed. That struck me as strange, but I thought 'well, whatever'. So I put myself to rest underneath that boat. Let me think, is that right? Anyway, a young couple turned up and they were about to start doing it right there [laughs]. I was terrified, because they were making quite a lot of noise, and I was terrified that, if they would notice someone else lying there, that could have had terrible consequences. Those are really the things you never forget. I believe I was lying underneath the boat and they were in it, or I was in the boat and they were underneath. I was only thinking one thing, that they shouldn't notice me, because that would have made me some

kind of creepy weird voyeur, or a thief or whatever. It was all in the hills, it was dark and it was night and it was above the sea.

What I also remember – but well, those are one’s stock stories – is that I thought I also spoke Italian, because I spoke French. So I came into a café, still without money, without anything, really. I said to them that I wanted to eat and that "*sono molto famoso*" ["I am very famous"], thinking I was saying "I am very hungry" [laughs]. That really happened.

Roels: Very famous, yes [laughs].

Nooteboom: I'm very famous, so I want to eat something. How people look at you then? [laughs] "Very well, little fellow." But I have to tell you, the Italians and me [...]. Every Saturday I go to Lindau and there is an Italian couple. I have an instant connection with that man, and the lady is beautiful and nice. They sell foodstuff, and after I've been there two or three times, they know: this guy knows. Every time I come they do this [welcoming gesture]. So there I am among all those Germans [laughs] and I am not Italian, they know that, but I'm not a German either. These nuances within Europe: I have no prejudices against Germans. I owe a whole lot to Germany. Yet, then again, I also owe the war to Germany, in a manner of speaking. These things all play a role at a certain level. I also had some of that Dutch anti-sentiment, because of war movies and all that shouting. English war movies had German in them: after a "No sir!" they would go on in German. Germans impersonating Englishmen.

Anyway, I completely forget to tell you that I had also been to England in the meantime, on several occasions. I never hitchhiked there, interestingly, but I was very much impressed by it; it was still an era of poverty back then. I took the boat and arrived in Harwich early in the morning, and in the train people were eating entire bloaters [cold-smoked herring]. I thought it was a very strange sort of people. But I managed pretty quickly to move around there.

Roels: What was the attitude towards you as a Dutchman? Were there any prejudices amongst the English or Italians in that regard?

Nooteboom: Well, you have to try to keep all that in mind, because so much has changed. But you can say, in a way, of course, that I manoeuvred myself pretty resourcefully by mimicry and aping. In France, right, I wouldn't put up a grand argument about literature in French, but I have been on French television in recent years in programs and can just talk about what I've done. I've got 26 books in French. Well, I mean, I'm not talking about the books I possess (*laughing*), but they've released 26 different titles. I have a very good relationship with my French publisher – the books were never a huge success, but they always keep on publishing them. In Germany I really had a big hit for several years. That also ends at some point. Those are the things that happen to me and you have to be able to handle both.

Oh my, Lord Jesus, an evening with 800 people in Germany, and signing books! The behaviour of Germans, right, “*Können Sie schreiben!*” [“Could you sign?”, *said in a fast and impolite way*] My last talk was in Münster, Germany, last December. I had told some anecdote, I don’t remember exactly what it was, but someone in the anecdote said: “*Hau ab, Arschloch!*” [“Bugger off, asshole!”] So there I am behind my little desk and people come to me, “*Können Sie schreiben?*” I’ve seen many things. “*Können Sie schreiben für meine Mutter?*” [“Could you sign for my mother?”]. So I say “nein.” [“no”] “*Wieso nicht, Sie schreiben doch für jedenmann hier?*” [“Why not, you are signing for everyone here, aren’t you?”] Germans, they always feel slighted, don’t they? “*Sie schreiben doch für jedenmann hier?*” So I said, “*Ja, aber es ist ganz einfach. Weil Ihre Mutter nicht meine Mutter ist.*” [“Yes, but it’s very simple. Because your mother is not my mother.”] [laughs].

Roels: [laughs] Yes, a lack of irony.

Nooteboom: Gone. “*Ich schreibe für meine Mutter.*” [“I am signing for my mother”] “*Nein.*” [“No”] “Ah, okay.” So, anyway, there was this man who had heard that anecdote, and he comes up he says: “*können Sie schreiben, "hau ab, Arschloch"?*” [“Could you sign “Bugger off, asshole”?”] So that’s what I write down obediently [laughs]. You experience and learn quite a lot by signing books behind those little desks in Italy, Spain or France. I did a lot of that, but much more in Germany than elsewhere. It was truly wonderful when I had a bestseller with *Die folgende Geschichte* [*The Following Story*]. They sit there in an auditorium for an hour and really enjoy it; such queues afterwards! That’s more or less over now. Long ago, I was invited by the DAAD, the *Deutsche Akademische Austausch Dienst* [“German Academic Exchange Service”]. The gentleman who wrote that very nice booklet (*points to a book on the table*), *Eidechsen*, you should have a look at it.

Roels: By Joachim Sartorius?

Nooteboom: He used to be a diplomat and the one in charge of the *Berliner Festspiele* [a theatre festival], I believe, and when I was there [i.e. in Berlin] he was in charge of the *Deutsche Akademische Austausch Dienst*. They put me up for two years and it stayed that way afterwards. That was, of course, what you call a *godsend* [English in the original] for me. They were enjoying it because it all went so well for me. At the same time that had terrible consequences, me being locked up in a room somewhere to sit there and sign 700 books. That’s truly like working on an assembly line.

Roels: How long does it take to sign 700 books, does that take hours?

Nooteboom: Well, you do that quickly. I mean, that was for one particular bookseller in the South who ordered it. So the publisher comes up to you and says: here, sign. I’ve also seen all that. It’s no longer necessary, but I’ve had that 800 people were sitting there and very many of them wanted a book signed. Quite recently I had to sign for an hour. People always want to tell or ask

something, and sometimes it's very difficult. If a book was going well, you would get those requests from booksellers all over Germany. I've always done that.

Roels: Is German a language you tend to prefer? You mentioned reading a lot of Spanish. Do you have a preference for a particular foreign language?

Nooteboom: You partly become someone else, when speaking another language. I always say it's *le don de l'imitation* ["the gift of imitation"] – that's how you do it, mimicry, aping or whatever you call it, you can't teach people to do that. It's also some form of intelligence, of course, but it's not really a merit. Some people really speak better French than me, but a Frenchman can't get used to them: they have an absolute vocabulary, it doesn't sound good and you can't help it. Like I said, not really a merit. The only merit, perhaps, is to be fond of it, and therefore you try to do better. I also speak Dutch quite well, you know. But occasionally I find myself saying "*und*" to Simone [Sassen, Nooteboom's wife] all of a sudden, when we're here [i.e. in Germany]. That's not good. I'm terrified for that to happen in the Netherlands: look, there's that guy again.

Roels: It happens to me every once in a while, to say "*Tschüss*" ["Good bye"] by mistake, or "*danke*" ["thanks"] or "*genau*" ["exactly"], such words.

Nooteboom: Yes, "*Tschüss*"! Exactly, those are the things you say.

Roels: We've now talked about France, Spain, Germany, Italy, among others. Are there also European countries where you've never been? We are now mostly in Western Europe.

Nooteboom: Well, I was in Budapest at the wrong and exactly right moment. I have a great friend there, you should look him up for this [i.e. Voices of Europe-project]. But you only do one person, don't you?

Roels: [laughs] I could perhaps do more.

Nooteboom: He is a highly intelligent, great person named László Földényi, a professor in, let's say, philosophy – but not quite. He has written a couple of wonderful books, including a book about melancholy, now published by Yale University Press, so you can read it in English. He was in Berlin at the same time I was there for DAAD and afterwards, when they allowed me to stay. I had the apartment of a Chilean. An ugly, big apartment in the Goethestraße, nothing fancy, but big, like all those apartments in Berlin.

Roels: Is this the 60s?

Nooteboom: No, we have to ask Simone for that. Hold on, no, it's the time of *Die folgende Geschichte*, but I'm really bad at dates. Anyway, that Joachim Sartorius was in charge and lived in the Mommsenstraße, where many people came over.

Let me tell you an anecdote. Look, in the Netherlands there is more of a distance, and I wouldn't easily come into contact with a professor of philosophy. Now I would, maybe, but back then certainly not. It's off topic, but what I'm

experiencing now with the Dutch in the embassy in Tokyo really makes me think “this is a terrible people, isn’t it?” - I will tell you later.

Roels: Please!

Nooteboom: Anyway, one evening I give a talk in Berlin, in the Wolfsbücherei. I don’t know if it still exists, a big, beautiful bookshop. So I give that talk, and I must say I was really successful with those talks. People sit still, listen; I sign and also earn something; all very nice. Now let’s change perspective for a second. You know who Safranski is, I suppose.

Roels: Yes, by name.

Nooteboom: All those books of his about philosophy, Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche, Hölderlin, a great man who became a very good friend. So anyway, that same day his wife said to him: “*Hör mal, dieser Nooteboom wo du immer über redest, der ist überhaupt nicht tot!*” [“Listen up, that Nooteboom you always talk about, he’s not dead, anyway!”] [laughs]. The thing is, he had discovered me when he was 17. Turns out “*Ihr Buch war bei uns auf dem Gymnasium der Geheimtipp.*” [“Your book was the hidden gem people talked about while we were in grammar school”] From my point of view, that book, *Philip and the others*, had been a reasonable success in the Netherlands. Because of that, as it happens, one is translated, and a translation appeared at the Eugen Diederichs Verlag in Düsseldorf or something, I don’t remember. I hadn’t met those people, but the book had been published and that was it, I thought, I never heard anything about it again, and had also seen few reviews. But he had read it and at his school they thought it was a fantastic book. He was 17, but kept thinking that [I was dead] all along, so he came to that talk, because he wanted to see that for himself. We are talking about 1980, so what was my age at the time? Anyway, the talk was over, and that doesn’t happen often, but the bookseller said: “*Das war wunderbar, suchen Sie sich ein Buch aus.*” [“That was great, do pick yourself a book”] Great, I thought. You know what they do in bookstores, sometimes they put something upright to draw attention to it. So I saw this book with Schopenhauer on it, head long, and said: “*ich möchte das Buch*” [“I’d like that book”], that never hurts. It was written by Safranski. And then she said [the bookseller]: “The author is here. Would you like to have it signed?” I said: “Yes, please.” So he came up and I asked for a signature. No, wait, let me think how it happened exactly: he had brought *Philip and the others* with him. So he says “Yes, I will give you a signature, but then I’d like your signature on this.” Well, that’s how we met, and we’ve been friends ever since then. He also made a book from different works of mine, collecting passages and phrases and ordering them thematically – he’s a philosopher, you see – under seven or eight headings like ‘travel’, ‘time’. The German title is a quote from a poem of mine, the line ‘*Ik had wel duizend levens en ik nam er maar één*’ [“I had a thousand lives and I only took one”]. Have you ever seen that? The book is really worth it, and I was naturally very honoured by it. It has also been

published in Dutch, but of course no review whatsoever. No, it is really unimaginable.

Roels: Let's get back to my question. Did you go to Budapest with him? Or was that before?

Nooteboom: No, no, those were Dutch photographers, in '56, mind you, not in the eighties. Two photographers, Frits Berend and another one. Both dead, I believe. Everyone's dead. That's something to keep in mind, you get that at this age. In any case, that was a fundamental experience, because you knew that the Russians had surrounded the city. And I have to tell you, unlike some of my Dutch friends, someone like Mulisch [Harry Mulish, prominent Dutch 20th century novelist], I've never had that tendency, that leftist thing, towards communism. No, I had nothing with Castro - gosh, such gushing about Castro! I didn't have that, because I spent a lot of time in Latin America. But well, that's something else, that's not Europe – back to Safranski. I could ask him anything. That was the education I never had, especially when he still lived in Berlin. The man has what we used to call a 'golden mouth', I believe, in literature. Flows right out, always structured, full of enthusiasm. With a drink it is completely beautiful, but now he's becoming as deaf as a doorpost. It's getting tough, but if he has got a hold of a topic, he will sit here arguing: "*Ja, Hegel, Hegel, jeder redet über Hegel, aber Lensk!*" ["Yes, Hegel, Hegel, everybody talks about Hegel, but what about Lensk!"] We also sometimes get into a row, because he really is – well, yeah, a true German, in the end. His mother, whom I knew well, was from a Pomeranian background, what is now Kaliningrad. They had a really hard time coming west, such a ship with 6000 of those people on it being torpedoed, that's his *Herkunft* ["origin"]. His mother was almost half-Russian: "Rüdiger!" (*speaks very firmly with a rolling 'R'*). But anyway, about his wife: he had told her that whenever he used to have a new girlfriend, at your age, let's say, they always had to listen to *Philip and the others* first.

Roels: It was being read aloud?

Nooteboom: I think so too. His current wife and he are together for as long as I know him. Her name is Gisela Nicklaus. She used to do the press contacts for – what was the name of that publisher? Zieler. She travelled on press trips with people like von Weizsäcker, Gorbachev, and so on. She knew her way around. There is an Italian touch to her in some things she might say. But in any regard they are still together. Since we've met I've learned a lot about Germany, of course. She once lived in Rottweil; now they live in Badenweiler, over there near Freiburg. Even if he never did a professorship, I can very much recommend it.

Roels: [laughs] Okay, I'll keep it in mind. Now a slightly different question, before we take a break.

Nooteboom: Anything you like.

Roels: We've mostly been talking about Europe as the entire continent, the cultural area, but of course there's also the EU. I was wondering how you experienced all those developments concerning the EU, its establishment after the war and the past decades. Is all that a vivid memory, the first years of the European Economic Community?

Nooteboom: I think I know pretty much how it went. It started out with things we ordinary people don't understand at all, of course. Coal and Steel Community. Let's not pretend we know everything. So coal and steel and then there were De Gasperi and, God, those names that stick in your memory, [Jean] Monnet, the saints ...

Look, at the beginning I was invited a lot. It may also be in that booklet [i.e. C. Nooteboom, *Wie wird man Europäer?* (1993): see above], it's all a bit gone now. One was invited, because A, one spoke one's languages and B, wasn't completely retarded, and you'd written something about it or you'd read about it a lot. Then there would be these European evenings in those years...

Roels: Were there European evenings in those years?

Nooteboom: Yes, in Paris, I lived to see such an evening with the chief rabbi and the cardinal, but also with prominent ladies and gentlemen. I also shook hands with Mitterrand.

Roels: So what, in those cases, was the idea behind Europe?

Nooteboom: Well, in Mitterrand's case, that I met him in Prague was rather not a pro-Europe idea. I don't know if you still remember, but suddenly the German reunification was on the table. Mitterrand wasn't exactly in favour of it. So a meeting was called there, with Havèl. I was there with a small group of Dutch people, among whom the historian, what was his name? It'll come to me, surely, but not immediately. Somehow I was assigned to that group, or I was allowed to come with them; whatever it was, I had just received the Légion d'Honneur from France. That historian, a great man – I will ask Simone. It is also partly my memory, because I lose things, names – said I should go and thank Mitterrand for receiving the Légion d'Honneur. I hadn't received it in Paris, but in [...].

Roels: Prague?

Nooteboom: No, in the Netherlands, from the French ambassador. I have been served best by France. I am also Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres. All those things. It all originated from that time. From Germany: Bundeskreuzes, Bundesverdienstkreuzes. Well, a whole array, just to offer you some insights. Then this man – I want to say Mommsen all the time, but it wasn't him; I think his name started with an 'M', though – pushed me in the back when Mitterrand came by. So I stood in front of Mitterrand, who was very short. I'm not particularly tall, but he reached until here [laughs]. "Monsieur le president, je tiens a vous remercier pour mon" ["Mister president, I would like to thank you for my..."] – that small, ice-cold head. And he said: "C'est naturelle, monsieur."

["That's natural, sir"] I thought: so what exactly is natural, that I thank him or that I received it? [laughing] But those are the things you don't forget: "C'est naturelle, monsieur." Still, an important man in European history, after all.

Roels: And then he walked on?

Nooteboom: Yes, of course. What else can you do? Before you know it, there are five people saying "thank you very much".

No, but I do remember that attempt, which was also interpreted as such, as an attempt to stop it. I don't know if that was the case, but it was a very tense moment back then, because suddenly East Germany was a part of it; and look, Poland. I know I had a very strong European sentiment, for what it's worth. I was thinking that all those countries that have been left out because of Yalta could now come back, fortunately, because they belonged to Europe before the war. One used to go to Budapest or from Austria to wherever. Those countries were really part of it, also in terms of civilization, of literature. It is ridiculous to say 'also in terms of civilization', but you know what I mean. Communism has of course covered up and distorted what they were like in an incredible manner. There was no such thing in the era of the Rilke's and Čapek's. That's why I was convinced that they should now be part of it.

Let me tell you something that is a bit of a side-line, but quite interesting nonetheless, and, believe me, also a European story. One of the great *Befürworter* ["advocates"] of the reunification was Boebi Brugsma, although that name doesn't ring a bell anymore. It was an amazing guy who had been in Dachau and Natzweiler. A good-looking, tall fellow, a dear friend of Mulisch – that's how I got to know him. He was a terrific speaker and story-teller. He had interviewed Pompidou, spoke his languages. That's what one had learned in the camp. He had been in the resistance in the Netherlands, not yet a student. So then you end up in a *Konzentrationslager* ["concentration camp"]; first in the *Nacht und Nebel* camp, Natzweiler – I actually went there to look at it, afterwards in Buchenwald – or yes, well, no: Dachau, beforehand. I've lost it now, but at least for a long time. Then he came out of it after the war and wanted to become a journalist, so he went to Elsevier [i.e. a Dutch weekly]. Just to sketch the atmosphere a bit: at the time Elsevier's editor-in-chief was Lunshof, and I knew Lunshof's daughter. I literally heard her say: "Dad says that when the Russians come, we will be hanged first." Just so you know that that was going on. They really thought about it that way.

Well, this Brugsma, after having been in the resistance as a very young man and coming out of the war, goes up to Lunshof to try to get a job at Elsevier, not knowing he would once become the editor-in-chief himself. Lunshof: "What did you study?" "Well, nothing." "What can you do?" "I speak several languages fluently." "Then you ought to be an *Oberkellner* ["chief waiter"]." [laughs] He became editor-in-chief of the Haagse Post [i.e. another Dutch weekly] and has

written a very nice book, *Ach Europa* ["Alas, Europe"], not to be neglected either. He was a very eloquent and handsome man and did well on those screens, and he married a Polish countess. We still know her; it was very difficult to get her out of Poland. So yes, that's European history [laughs].

But I skipped one thing and that's not good. When that *Wiedervereinigung* ["reunification", i.e. of Germany] took place I was living in Berlin and I had an old friend there. He's dead. That's the refrain. He wasn't enthusiastic at all and I didn't understand that. Brugsma wanted it, that *Wiedervereinigung*, in the same way I also wanted it. But they had some kind of, almost something racist with regard to East Germany. "Look at that, those pants, has to be from there". All about appearances. In retrospect, I think, they understood it better than me, all that came *with* it: not the clothes, the clothes are nothing.

Another indicator is that my books used to be published in Hungary, Bulgaria, wherever. Five years after the *Wiedervereinigung* that was all over. You know, if you walk into a newsstand over here nowadays, you can see 50, 100 magazines. All of them were not there: a book by a foreigner was something special. I used to be translated in East Germany, extensively so, by a publisher with a beautiful name, *Volk und Welt* ["People and World"]. That was quite something. *Volk und Welt*, I never heard of it since then, it all went to the West. So those big publishing houses, and the interest that had always been there – because something from the West was precious, you had to have it – all disappeared, because you could get anything [all of a sudden]. So what do you take? The rubbish. Yes, but those are very important developments, I think.

Roels: What's your opinion on that now?

Nooteboom: Well, that's still the same, of course. Poland: what does it offer Europe? There Mr. Timmermans is right, that they have no separation of powers, the *trias politica*. They don't have an instinct for it, they don't care: they want to be in charge, also of justice, also of the judiciary.

Roels: Hungary?

Nooteboom: Hungary, likewise. That awful Orbán. And everyone should deal with that. Because: why do we want to have something to do with those people do badly? Because it brings profit, and the European Union is financially important to them, but also to us. The market – it's all the market. I noticed that later on with all those wonderful conferences, they were pretty much over by then, as well.

Roels: Do you mean that it ended when Europe became more politically united?

Nooteboom: No, I don't believe we are really politically united. I believe there are huge discrepancies. If I see that what was going on yesterday, again about money, I mean the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Austria teaming up – because England is gone. That is disadvantageous for us, because England

always used to be our secret ally We are Anglophiles au fond ["deep down"], many Dutch people, Germans, Germans from the north too. Tweed jackets and the better circles, right, they know that. Take Greece, for example, those horrible situations going on there now. Why? They get those people, they can't shoot them, and 40 thousand of them are there on a small Greek island in disgusting camps. And why is that? Because Poland, Hungary and so forth are just playing it very boldly. "We don't want them and they won't get in." So that is not European, but the other countries, except Germany under Merkel a few years ago? Merkel still has to pay dearly for that and so does the CDU.

Aren't the Dutch a bit hypocritical? There are too many of those refugees, and I cannot solve that either. And from Calais to England. Who's taking how many of them and, most of all, who's not taking how many? That will be the big dividing line, because countries that were a bit decent, or still are, also see that those others simply do not join the effort. And now they have even come up with some kind of compensation, mechanisms through which those who don't take them get money. Thank you very much. Or Turkey, receiving large sums of money to keep them there, and all that is happening to Syria now, there in Idlib.

Then you see: what is European politics? Macron thinks all of us together should also be a significant military power. If you want to play along – but I don't have the wisdom, I just say what I see. China is laying low for a while because of the crisis with this virus, then there's America – well, you don't have to talk about that madman, but it is all very real. It's power. And what are we, then? If we agree on nothing, like the Spaniards, you simply don't mean that much as a power.

Roels: What do you think we could agree on?

Nooteboom: Well, we're an economic power, but given the course of history that usually implies that you can also put that power into practice. If you can't, in the end, you're not a real power. People are already starting to talk about the French nuclear power, because the French are the only ones who have it. England had one, but we lost them, in a way. That's why England's departure is really an extremely important moment. I won't judge that, naturally, but I think it's stupid self-conceit.

Roels: Mister Nooteboom, I wanted to ask you, for the last part of the interview, if you could tell us whether you had any expectations of Europe, what your expectations used to be and what they are now. Where might we be 50 years from now?

Nooteboom: Honestly, I must say, I am too prudent to dare to answer that. I really mean that. Look, first of all: going back in time, my ideas about what Europe was, exactly, were quite vague. I wasn't so well equipped in those days to be on top of that. Coal and Steel Community. The small Union, then the hassle. A few years later, when Mrs. Thatcher joined with her demands and

exceptions. I still see those images of her. That whole hassle; they all always needed to have all kinds of exceptions and that has eventually resulted in the total exception, namely without England. Exit. [laughs] Excepted. Well, yes, a pity, I think that's a pity, and with that actually something definite has already happened, I think, if it stays this way, which is also not a given. I think the dream of the English to be once more ... – being a global power is excluded, anyway. They've barely been talking about a *special relationship* [English in the original] with America, or they're already arguing about Huawei and things like that. That's not quite settled, certainly not with a peculiar type, as is the situation there now.

It could also very well be that this Trump has no instinct for what kind of creature England actually is. It doesn't mean anything, but sometimes, I believe, you have to look at certain things. When he once had to inspect the guard of honour with Queen Elisabeth (*laughing*) he had positioned himself, peculiarly, on the wrong side of the queen and had to flounder most clumsily. That old lady knew exactly what was going on, but she didn't move a muscle. It doesn't mean anything, but sometimes those meaningless things make something visible. So, I don't know how that will end. I don't believe, with this man, that you can think that you've got him. Nobody got him, for the time being, not in the least. Of course you never know, but I think he may perhaps be re-elected, in which case he will most probably become four years older and more opinionated.

That has stirred up quite something in Europe, you already see it now. The four countries, the so-called countries with cash, the cautious countries [the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Austria] are really thinking at the back of their minds that those people over there in the south should not think they can live out of our pockets. At the same time, in Italy they are very well aware that the *austerity* [English in the original] that was demanded at a certain point actually yielded Germany quite a lot of money. In truth, however, you can only talk about these things if you are well versed in the economy, and I'm not. You can surmise something, read things and find something out. But let's say a true economist views these political issues differently from someone like me.

Roels: If, however, we do not look at politics, but rather at a socio-cultural area in which we are witnessing an era of open borders, young people studying in different countries, people all speaking English, some kind of uniform culture seems to develop. Do you have a specific wish for Europe?

Nooteboom: Let's go back one step. One of the really very important things is that you see that a protest culture is starting to emerge practically everywhere, which wasn't the case beforehand. Every night when I turn on Spanish television there is a huge farmers' protest, but also in our country: farmers taking to the streets in their tractors. It wasn't like that. There were strikes and those things. Now it's all over Europe, also here, and in Italy as well. There they are again, all of them.

In Italy there is a favourable type of demonstration: the sardines. You've kept track of that, I suppose. Those are the right-minded – I'm just guessing – sensible people reading *NRC* [i.e. a Dutch liberal newspaper considered to be of high quality] who find that things are getting out of hand, with this man [Salvini].

Earlier this week when I saw that Baudet [Thierry Baudet, young elitist right-wing politician in the Netherlands]. Well, I mean, of course I understand what he says, with his so-called classical background. You know what I mean, his Boreans, or what did he come up with? Yes, well, stolen from certain ideas pertaining to grammar school, I suppose. But nonsense. The people voting for him do so precisely not for that reason. Earlier this week it was very interesting, with another gigantic farmers' demonstration. There you had the CDA-representative [Dutch Christian democrats], and in the CDA people look very much at Baudet. At least, in that part of Brabant [province in the southern Netherlands] where the CDA is so important, they want to move in that direction and there could be a possibility to do so [a coalition of CDA and Baudet's party in Brabant's provincial government was in an advanced stage of negotiation]. Then you get the same trouble as here in Thuringia [in Germany] with the AfD. So then Baudet came on stage in his neat jacket amongst those of the *Armed Defence Force*, or whatever.

Roels: The *Farmer Defence Force* [i.e. Dutch protest group of farmers who oppose restrictions on agriculture; English in the original]?

Nooteboom: Yes, and he also wanted to say something, and then someone said to him: "Yes, mind you, but we will also come up to you if things are not going well, because we have yet to see that you live up to what you are saying". That, of course, is where it all boils down to. Just the thought of that becoming the biggest party – God forbid. But anyway, a skittish fellow. He doesn't look, you see, and his eyes always move away.

Roels: That protest culture, then...

Nooteboom: Yes, in Spain, oh boy: every day they are out on the streets and nowadays there also is the added element of the female protest culture. I believe something like 1039 women have already been killed in this year alone, in Spain.

Roels: 1039?

Nooteboom: Yes, not exactly that number perhaps, but it's a lot. I always watch the Spanish news. That's on at 9 p.m., and around 9.20 there is, pretty regularly, what they call a *violencia de genero*: a love crime. Often elder men as well, elder women, it's all terrible. An example in the German newspapers is that guy, that recent one, who killed people, who killed Muslims in Hanau. He also killed his mother. But I don't read anywhere in the newspaper why he also killed his mother, and how. I found that very strange and that is why I would have liked

to read *Bild* [*Bild Zeitung*, a very popular German tabloid], because they do report on such things.

Roels: Is it discussed there?

Nooteboom: Yes, and also who the ten men are whom he has killed. Maybe they have some pictures or more data about them, because all you read in those official big newspapers is that it is terrible. So then you get those large pieces again that this must have an end, and that's terrible and everything. But the *human interest* pieces [English in the original], more details about what exactly happened there... Those guys were just sitting there smoking a hookah in one of those cafes, like the ones you also have in Amsterdam.

Roels: Do you think Europe is growing more violent and countries are increasingly isolating themselves?

Nooteboom: Could be. You never know. Look at Hungary. Is that just one man [Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister] or is it very widely supported? That man is rather potent, but is he generally supported? They do vote for that Fidesz-party. Is that because of him? Would it be a lot less with someone else in his place? I don't know; that's one thing. In Poland there are those Kaczyński's. Also a phenomenon of sorts, but not so powerful anymore: it's more the party, that PiS party. Simply put, it is the rural population against the urban population, another phenomenon. The Netherlands, for example, is a country like a metropolis. In big countries like Germany there is a natural counterweight to the city. The countryside is always a natural counterbalance, so strangely enough the countryside is in revolt in our country [The Netherlands]: also interesting.

Earlier this week there was a broadcast with [Dutch architect] Rem Koolhaas, who is now suddenly getting all involved in the countryside, with an exhibition in New York and so on. I once had an official public conversation with him in London. That was very weird. He's a real Dutchman, and a truly Calvinist one, mind you, but truly amazing buildings and all that – we also met him at the opening of the embassy in Berlin. But then, all of a sudden, all he was talking about was the countryside. He showed pictures of America with those huge buildings that are being built in the countryside for farmers, for silos. All those things, you ought to be a phenomenologist... There are always things by which you can recognise things, without immediately knowing what they are. I noticed that there too.

Roels: How long ago was that, the big interview with Rem Koolhaas?

Nooteboom: The one with me? That was a public discussion with Koolhaas in the South Bank. What I really remember about that was actually the following. He was a writer, not an architect. There were some Latin Americans in the auditorium who had questions for him; he is a guru for architecture students. "I am not here to talk about architecture." Bang. Then, again: another attempt.

Clack. Nothing. "I'm here as a writer" – well, makes things a bit complicated for me, on my part. His father [Anton Koolhaas] was a famous author. Famous, but he wrote those animal stories. His father was director of the Film Academy and wrote animal stories. He [Rem Koolhaas] was a writer and I still remember those disappointed faces of all those Latino's present there who were thinking: we can finally ask him something. No. Very rigidly, too. I found that interesting. He was very nice, but: he was a writer.

Roels: Getting back to that protest culture: in recent years...

Nooteboom: Yes, you hardly see anything else.

Roels: Did you use to participate in protests?

Nooteboom: I can tell you that. I participated once and I immediately had success with this demonstration, because we achieved what we wanted and that led to a total catastrophe.

Roels: Makes me curious!

Nooteboom: I can just as well tell you, but it had little to do with Europe. It was a demonstration against Pol Pot, against Cambodia. Well, not really a demonstration, not about – sorry, I'm telling it the wrong way. Pol Pot was the result of that demonstration against the American. I was never very much involved in the whole Vietnam history, although I kept track of it. Of course I was against that. Let's keep that simple, because I'm not stupid. But it ushered in a huge amount of anti-Americanism, which I don't have. Despite this all being about Europe I've been in America a lot, I married in America, once upon a time, in Harlem. Yes [laughs], because my wife was from Surinam and I was married by a big black minister with Leo Vroman [Dutch scientist and poet] as a witness, in an empty church, naturally. "*I Cornelis take thee Francis to heaven hold*" [English in the original], that. Back for a second?

Roels: Yes, a demonstration against Pol Pot?

Nooteboom: Yes, against the bombing of Cambodia by America. Bombing ended. Pol Pot came to power. Kills two million people. My fault. Well, I had a discussion about that with Mr Mulisch, since I had written down that I would frankly have liked to do that march all over again on my own once, to reflect about it, or as mourning or something for what happened there in the end.

Roels: That demonstration was in the Netherlands?

It was. We walked through the Oude and whatever. I also remember it because, when people next to me were yelling "Nixon murderer, Nixon murderer!" Harry Mulisch, oddly enough, yelled "Nothing murderer, nothing murderer!" [i.e. the Dutch word for 'nothing', *niks*, is phonetically equivalent to the *Nix-* in Nixon] All that while, he was anything but a supporter of Nixon, but maybe he enjoyed that. So I left out that "Nixon murderer" bit in what I'd written. Then in an interview with Piet Piryns in *Vrij Nederland* [i.e. Dutch progressive weekly] I said

that I actually regretted the fact that I had participated, because of the success it had obtained. So Mulisch replied, I have that clearly pictured, with some shitty comment about Pitiful Kees [i.e. due to the common nature of the name Kees/Cees, it is used as a general term for a person, e.g. in the expression 'Klaar is Kees!', i.e. 'Bob's your uncle' – Mulisch seems to have played on that], Cees being pathetic walking there with whatever. Anyway, I've never really felt at home in those demonstrations.

Roels: The fact that it had an undesired effect was not the reason why you never took part in the demonstration again?

Nooteboom: No, no. But to be honest, I never feel quite at home among a crowd that just wants one thing. If it were about something in which one were actually involved oneself, I believe one is much more entitled.

Roels: I have another, rather different question, about which I was just thinking. You've already experienced Europe for quite a few years. I think I was about twelve when the euro was introduced. To me, the idea of using a foreign currency within Europe mostly concerns Switzerland, really. How was the introduction of the euro for you, after having travelled so extensively?

Nooteboom: To begin with, I believed in it, thinking we would finally get to see some kind of synchronisation between countries. Yet it has had very remarkable consequences, economically speaking. There are really people out there who think that the euro was a mistake. There I refer to the economists again, because some economists also maintain that and I would like to understand that properly. Personally, however, I think: whatever, we have it now – and, I mean, the fuss you always used to have. Practically speaking, really, when one used to drive to France or to Spain, you had to change that whole mess twice on a single day. I can still picture that very clearly, all those coins.

Roels: So how did that work, practically, with different wallets?

Nooteboom: Yes, well, look. At a certain moment there was that credit card as well, pretty soon. But still, for example, in this essentially quite conservative country [i.e. Germany], there are stores where I know they don't accept that European credit card, so we don't buy there. Then they say "No, we don't have that and it's not possible and the machine won't take it." So I say, "You don't want to take it." "No, no." So I say: "look here", and I'll go to a gas station first, pay by credit card, so I have proof and I then go back to the same store. Then they say: "the machine can't take it." So I say: "but why is it that this machine *can* take it?" So, yeah, that's what you get. But those things, you have to do them too.

Roels: Did you see the euro coming? Or was it something you had already expected for some time?

Nooteboom: I don't think I'm like that. I think I heard that, that it was coming. Then you hear and see it coming, and then the moment is there. So then you look at it, at those notes, what they look like. But of course it is very strange that with those same notes you suddenly also notice that in England you are faced with a strange barrier and then you think: are they really retarded, that they still don't understand? So now it turns out that they weren't retarded, that they didn't want it and still don't want it. Then with their silly pounds and *six pence* [English in the original] and who knows what they all have. I have always found it difficult, English money, and I had quite a lot to do with it back in the day. I also have English publishers and they pay me in pounds, so you think, "splendid, that's more", but that's of course not true at all. No, financial relations... but in all those things one should absolutely never forget about money, because you can write what you want, people's sentiments, ideas, but in the end it always has a lot to do with money.

Then there are those who say that the euro is a construction error for Europe. Honestly, I still don't know how it will end, because, well, those Poles or Hungarians can say, or want to say, "otherwise we will leave", but the question is whether we won't have left before that. People from the north are naturally, let's say, perhaps a little more cautious or, well, prejudiced – or privileged. That's also possible due to certain financial constructions. What then? Well, if we end up leaving, right, the Dutch go out: my instinct tells me that's no longer possible. You can't really get out. But there's also marriage, out of which you can't get out either [laughs] and then still get out, so then there's a divorce and it hurts. Some people still say the bank issues and the euro aren't really solved yet, but, I admit, I'm not an economist, and I read very little about that here.

That's also something, you see, this [i.e. Germany] is not really an international country. In the Netherlands I can get the Financial Times every day and I read it to at least make a little sense of what happens. Also on Saturday it's a fantastic newspaper for art and culture and what's going on there. It really is a very good newspaper, but at the same time almost a little corrupt, interestingly. They have this extra magazine – and the Financial Times is of course read by people in the financial world, not all necessarily very rich, but some are extremely rich – which is very fancy and is literally called, for years by now, 'How to spend it?' Your question would immediately be: 'how to spend what?' But there are, indeed, houses selling for a couple of million, at least – never a house under a few million in those ads – and most of all a lot of watches, as well, of 30 thousand, 50 thousand or 100 thousand. That is an utterly curious contradiction, and one probably applied with irony by the people behind it, to their truly liberal ideas in that newspaper. I find that interesting, since they always have very good and enlightened views. The newspaper is, of course, upheld by that supplement with which they earn the most, with the advertising it contains. As time passes, you do see changes: think of how the Dutch papers used to be. NRC and such now also have those fancy supplements about

lifestyle and all that nonsense. A lot of Me-too-hassle, do pardon me. All that is in vogue: some things are justifiably in vogue, other rather less so.

Roels: How did it use to be?

Nooteboom: Well, I think the NRC would have been embarrassed to write so extensively about luxury, back then. It's impossible to imagine nowadays, but they, well, their intellectual department was larger, books were more prominent, to mention one thing. That's all getting less.

Roels: Do you see that as a broader change in this day and age, it being more about lifestyle and less about the intellectual?

Nooteboom: Yes, so how can those papers survive? Well, through ads, and how can they manage through ads? I think they're tightening the buckle there as well. I don't know, really. I'm sitting here as if I know everything, but I don't know anything, really. I've often had that with political discussions. People ask me, "*Ja, und Sie?*" ["So, what do you think?"], and I always say: listen here, you want to know what I think about all this, but I am not Jesus in the temple. I am a writer, I write novels and I write poems. That doesn't mean I know a bit more than the audience, economically speaking, for example, or about Europe.

Roels: Let me ask you other things then, more in relation to your work as an author. Were there major European events that have had a major impact on your writing?

Nooteboom: Yes, I wrote a novel called *All Souls' Day* [*Allerzielen*, in Dutch (1998); published in an English translation in 2001]. It is about the German reunification and the drama that surrounded it. So yes, I think so, also in my non-novel, my big book about Santiago, which is not about Santiago, but essentially about Spain [*De omweg naar Santiago* (1992); published in an English translation in 1997]. It addresses a whole lot Spanish politics of the past. That's after '76, when Spain, well, adopted the new constitution they're all talking about now. At that point, even a man like Santiago Carrillo, the communist leader who could have been in prison for that reason, along with all those others... at that point, there was a brief moment of, let's say, a national 'letting go of each other in the fight', as a kind of reconciliation and a kind of climate in which González could become prime minister. That really was a good politician. This Sanchez isn't too bad, by the way, I believe, but the right is terrible in Spain at the moment. It's a bunch of machos, truly machos. That Casado then, well – it may not mean a lot to you anymore.

Roels: No, I'm not really into [...].

Nooteboom: Terrible. Look, now there is also an extreme right in Spain again, that's called Vox. You should know about that, and pay close attention to it, because that's ghastly. Those are creeps. In Spain, mind you: creepy in Spain is not the same as creepy in the Netherlands, since these countries really have a history of gruesomeness. Very nasty people and things that come out of there.

And you have that here [i.e., in Germany] too, Höcke [Björn Höcke, extreme right-wing politician involved in the anti-immigration party AfD]. Those are truly disgusting characters, no problem in saying that. Last week, this Weidel [Alice Weidel, right-wing politician leading the AfD] was in a talk show, with Maybrith Iler [journalist and talk show host], I believe. Those talk shows are actually pretty insane, because they all sit there together and Mrs. Wagenknecht [Sahra Wagenknecht, left-wing politician] is sitting next to Mrs. Weidel. Good that it happens, actually, but well, it's all irreconcilability, evidently. And then Weidel is attacked about Höcke. She's not too fond of Höcke herself, I understood, but then you can't say that openly, because – well, now, in the FAZ [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] today, there it is actually being suggested that Gauland [Alexander Gauland, president of the anti-immigration party AfD], Höcke and those people have made such a murder possible by the discourse they employ. There's some truth in that, in the end.

Roels: Do you mean the murder in Hanau? [On 19 February 2020, nine people were killed in by an armed far-right extremist in the German town near Frankfurt]

Nooteboom: Yes, but there are many such things. And then, well, you think: I'm quite close by and I interact with all kinds of people, and then you get those very normal things. It's a rural area, of course. It's not like there is someone from Mongolia in every fifth house here, or, what's it called? I didn't mean to say Mongolia...

Roels: The Middle East?

Nooteboom: Angola or something, or Middle East or whatever. And amongst each other those people have something? Of course I don't think you should give in to that, but I consider that, well, all right. But we do very much like to remain amongst each other here. Also I find the left-wing discourse in the Netherlands ..., I used to have arguments about that with people: it doesn't happen to you, it doesn't happen to me. But it does happen in some deprived areas in Rotterdam or The Hague or Amsterdam, where suddenly people come to live next to you, other people anyway, but I am used to it. I have travelled a lot, also in the Arab world. I also have a book called 'the sound of His (capital) name' [*Het geluid van Zijn naam* (2005)]. That, you see, is what you always hear, right? (imitates the sound of a muezzin) Well, those people have never heard that, and they feel that it doesn't belong in that neighbourhood either. Those things, to me, seem very natural in themselves, so how do you deal with that? By not offending those people by pretending that they are all retarded, because they really do not want to be. So then you get that whole fuss. It's turned around: the elite. Suddenly we are the elite. That is really *the* term of abuse now in the Netherlands, the canal district [Amsterdam's historical centre, inhabited by generally affluent people, and therefore used as a term for the well-to-do section of society: *grachtengordel* in Dutch], the elite.

Roels: The white wine drinkers [referring to a famous remark by Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte in January 2019, about the 'white wine-sipping elite' in Amsterdam].

Nooteboom: [laughs] Yes, just name a few more. The world is incredibly complex and all I see is that it is becoming more complex still. But what I just told you, that always stuck with me: he [Boebi Brugsma] came to ask for a job at Elsevier, and didn't get it. He started working for the GPD, what was it called? [Geassocieerde Pers Diensten, "Associated Press Services", a Dutch national news agency originally founded by regional newspapers]. Not the regional press, but nationwide, a series of newspapers. So, he was sent out to cover all Independence Wars going on, in Algeria, Indonesia, all kinds of wars in Africa, Lumumba, and so on. So he would come back from those trips, every time, and tell or write about the extreme poverty he had seen – which you can still see. He didn't even live to see it himself, but he said: 'You know what? One day they will come.' He always said it like that. And mind you, he wasn't a party member or anything, absolutely not, just someone who observed. One day they will come, since we're here and we're rich, and they will come to get it. So there they are, they're there now. They are prepared to die, that's how badly they are wanting to come. So we have to keep coming up with devilish things to keep them there, that's what we keep on trying: giving money, there you go, but please stay there. The younger generation is prepared to go that far; of course they're not retarded, they will probably hear about people not coming back every now and then, people drowning, and so on. That happens on quite a scale by now, and then there are those stories about what happens to those people brought through Libya by the smugglers, what happens in terms of rape, miserable torture, hell do I know, all that.

Then there's IS [Islamic terrorist organisation] and all those women with children sitting there in those camps. An ordinary Dutch or German television audience thinks: that's creepy. I agree. The day before yesterday it became very interesting indeed, also for you and this project to follow. I also watch Dutch television here, on my iPad. I can't watch Dutch [news] here: in Spain I can, but not here. So I watch the nine o'clock Spanish news in the evening. Little by little I'm quite old enough to think: leave the world to itself, what can I still do? But I watch it anyway, the Spanish news at 9 until they come to the homicides. Then I have some time to switch to Nieuwsuur [i.e. "News' hour"] in the Netherlands. So, earlier this week, there we go again: the Netherlands, then, is really quite Dutch. But then there is something opposite them, about which they don't really know how to handle it. You should try to keep track of that right now, because it's happening now. So there's a school, in Amsterdam I believe, but I'm not sure. Salafist.

Roels: You mean the Haga Lyceum, don't you? [Cornelis Haga Lyceum, a secondary school in Amsterdam based on Islamic principles that was in the

news because of government concerns over Salafist influences on teaching staff and finances]

Nooteboom: Yes, I don't know if it is that lyceum, but I often hear that name as well. No, so they had a certain mister Salam, the imam [Suhayb Salam, the imam of a controversial mosque in Utrecht who appeared before a parliamentary investigative committee]. So he appears in front of five, I believe it were, very decent, very Dutch governmental men of about 35 years old. He went right through them. It had nothing to do with that. He was as bold as brass, extremely annoying and extremely arrogant, as in "Yes, Mr. Salam, you have to understand..." – "I don't have to understand anything." Like that. "But we are the investigative committee and that is a legal..." – it was amazing to watch, but of course they were right, and eventually there will be a conclusion or a consequence. But he wiped his ass with all that, especially with those four civil servants. And then one thinks: well, this is not going to go down well. It was also the day of Hanau, I believe.

Roels: So I wondered, you said it is all getting much more complicated, and I also have that feeling.

Nooteboom: But this is very complicated. It is complicated with the farmers, it is complicated with the Muslims, it is complicated with money, with poverty. It's true that very few people earn incredible amounts of money, have it to fall back on and others could have problems with that. Although it has still not been possible to stir up that dispossessed mass into any kind of violent uprising, because that's not the way it works either. Everyone knows that, I think, and well, okay, Mrs. Heineken has 100 billion.

Roels: So can you still remember that when you were 30, for example, the world also felt complicated?

Nooteboom: That's what I often wonder, because that's a very normal question. I often find it scary now. When did it use to be so scary, before? That makes me think about the age of the atomic bomb, for example, when we were really afraid of that. By now we have gradually become used to the fact that it is *not* being dropped. That's not to say it will never be. But the fear that used to be part of that, back then, I don't have it any more, at least, personally. Maybe because of getting older and thinking: whatever. [laughs] You also just want to die. But it's weird. So I sometimes say to myself: decolonization. I remember that, for example, when I was in Paris. That makes for a European memory, aye! I still hear that slogan, "OAS Assassin! OAS Assassin!" Do you still know what OAS is?

Roels: No.

Nooteboom: Well, that was the group that was *against* Algeria's independence. They were there as well, the French, but also the other way around. I forgot some things, but I do remember that slogan. So in Paris there

were always police cars everywhere. In my memory they were actually always there, a lot more than in our country. But, yes, decolonization: in France you'd use to have the *pieds-noirs* ["black feet"]. A whole bunch of people from the former colony, resentful for having lost all their possessions there and for not really being accepted in France at the same time. Of course we've also had that. Earlier this week someone here started about the Moluccans. Then I say: but you've never understood what that is. Would you be able to explain to people what the Moluccans were, exactly?

Roels: Not quite, no.

Nooteboom: No. That's precisely what this is about. In Indonesia we used to have a – I don't want to say an SS, but we had a police and they were often Moluccans, who were part of law enforcement in totally different parts of Indonesia: sergeants, non-commissioned officers and you name it. That was truly happening. Then Indonesia becomes independent and we had promised the Moluccans that they would get a republic of their own – only that we didn't keep that promise. Cynical. European. Forget about your own republic. So they came to the Netherlands, because they were not popular in Indonesia. And in the Netherlands they were put in all kinds of neighbourhoods, let's say. But you could also call them camps, they often ended up there around Kampen [a Dutch city whose name is equivalent to the word for 'camps']. And at a certain moment there was that train strike over there, during which people were killed.

Roels: Yes, the train hijacking.

Nooteboom: Sorry, hijacking. So suddenly the Moluccans were a problem and an item. So they were put away and disposed of again. That is a typical decolonization-phenomenon. It took extreme proportions in France; in England I guess in an entirely different manner. When was that again, much more massive? But the *pieds-noirs* ended up in those *banlieues* [suburban areas of French cities, infamous for low-income housing projects], and in those *banlieues* there are also the Muslims. I mean, Europe will remember that, right? We will have to live with our own past as colonizers. The Swedes don't have it that way, nor do the Danes, but we do. In our country it went reasonably well with Indonesians, perhaps because Indonesians are not as fierce as others, since there are those entire Indonesian neighbourhoods in The Hague and that's not much of a problem. But I do notice, also, differences. If I want to go for a walk in Amsterdam I have to take the car to a certain part of town, because you can't park in your car inside Amsterdam. Then I take the bus, bus 21, which passes through Muslim neighbourhoods. The first thing that strikes you – I have white hair and perhaps I'm not too good on my legs sometimes – is that people always get up immediately and offer their seat. A certain respect for old age which is still part of that culture; not the youngsters, that much, but the middle-aged and older people. Those are all interesting phenomena, if you keep your eyes open. You don't have white hair, so you won't find out that way [laughs]. I

noticed it in Amsterdam, also on the tram, people of colour are more likely to get up for you.

Roels: Mr. Nootboom, we have to come to a close.

Nootboom: Yes, very well [laughs].

Roels: One last question. This project is also intended to bring younger and older generations into dialogue about Europe. So I was wondering, what is your message to the younger generation regarding Europe?

Nootboom: It sounds very silly as I say it now, but what I said to those students over there in London. Hitchhiking may not be so easy anymore, but certainly traveling and learning languages. Yet even within Europe learning languages can be crazy enough for most people. And try to keep up with the news a little bit. That is only easy when if the circumstances forced you to do so, and well, I don't know if that can be expected from people, truly. I see everybody being very happy now with carnival, and they're very happy on sporting grounds, happy with sports. People admittedly do not want to know about all that and to be concerned with everyone's problems all the time. That is an illness, of course, if you are constantly concerned with everyone's problems.

Roels: Okay, so languages and...

Nootboom: Yes, languages! After all, you're from a certain social class where learning languages is offered. That's why the situation in the UK and the US is so tragic, that will really have something to do with that. It makes it hard to understand the world.

Roels: Thanks very much. A nice final word. Thank you for this interview, it was very nice to talk to you.

Nootboom: You're welcome. I hope it is of any use to you.

Roels: [laughs] I think it is.

Nootboom: Well, Wie wird man Europäer?⁵

⁵ "How to become a European?", i.e. the title of a booklet by Nootboom (1993): see above