

Around “Grandchild of Van Son”

Portrait painted by Gisèle van Waterschoot van der Gracht

Saskia Vleugel, August 2026

English translation of the Dutch original “Rondom ‘Kleinkind van Van Son’”

This grandchild is my eldest sister Karin Vleugel, born on 10 November 1942, the first grandchild of the Bergen grocer Cornelis (Kees) van Son.¹ My grandfather was very proud of his grandchildren.

The Van Son family

Cornelis (Kees) van Son was a headstrong man with an entrepreneurial streak, born in 1887 as the eldest son of a grocer in Wijk aan Zee. At eighteen he ran away from home because he was angry with his parents: yet another child was on the way, although there were already plenty, and he (as an altar boy) had already had to bury several Van Son children.

He went to work for two partners, Messrs De Wijs and Broers, who ran a butter, cheese and egg shop on the Ritsevoort in Alkmaar. First he bought out one partner, then the other. He married Mr Broers’s niece, Mieke Broers, also from Alkmaar. The shop always kept the name De Wijs en Broers.

Kees transformed the shop into a business selling Delicatessen, Comestibles and Specialities, as the printing on surviving shop materials shows. It was a shop that the so-called “better-off” people of Alkmaar and Heiloo liked to visit, because of the quality of the products, the wide range and the service.² In 1919 Van Son opened his second shop, also under the name De Wijs en Broers, on the Kerkstraat in Bergen. The shop was larger than the one in Alkmaar, the house behind it was spacious, and it had a leafy garden. There was room for a large warehouse for the stock.³ I suspect Kees soon realised the potential of Bergen: more and more wealthy families from the big cities spent their long summer holidays there or had houses built in which they settled permanently. The Van Son family also moved from Alkmaar to Bergen and at first had quite some adjusting to do. Mieke, a city woman, dressed her daughters in a “modern” way, and that did not go down well with the village children at the convent school.⁴

¹The shop was known as “De Wijs en Broers” and was located on the Kerkstraat, on the corner of the Karel de Grotelaan in Bergen, opposite the Ruïnekerk, with Hotel-restaurant “De Rustende Jager” and Café Restaurant “De Pilaren” on the other corners on either side. Today it houses the moped shop Busker.

²You could order what you needed by telephone or through a shopping book, and the groceries were then delivered to your home.

³Goods were mostly bought directly from the factory, or from the farmer (cheese), rather than through a wholesaler. That made the profit margin larger. In addition, the firm supplied a great deal of food to hospitals and care homes for the elderly.

⁴The children were badly bullied – by the nuns as well – and were sometimes accompanied to school by the dog to scare off the bullies.

The Van Son family had five children. The eldest three were daughters: Ans (born 1914), Karin's mother; Puck (1918); and Chris (1920). The two youngest were Sim (1923), who also worked in the shop, and Carla (1925).

It is known that the daughters Puck and Chris, like so many young women, both lent a helping hand to resistance groups during the war.⁵ During the war they sometimes cycled from Bergen to Amsterdam to deliver packages to Herengracht 401.⁶ These probably did not contain food, possibly other things. De Wijs en Broers did a good deal of juggling with ration coupons for the benefit of people in hiding. Ans also took part in this in Alkmaar.

On the contacts between Gisèle and the Van Son family

How they knew each other I do not know, but very probably through Adriaan Roland Holst, who visited the shop almost every day. Doing an errand at De Wijs en Broers was part of his daily routine.⁷

I also assume that the closer contact with Gisèle only arose during the war.

That she could trust Kees van Son must gradually have become clear. He was not the type to let the occupier tell him what to do. And so it came about that during the war my grandfather began, among other things, to provide food parcels for Gisèle's "boys" in Amsterdam. Who else in the family besides my grandfather knew about this, I do not know. Perhaps only my grandmother. The less you knew, the better. They all understood that.

From then on Gisèle was a regular visitor at my grandparents' house whenever she was in Bergen. She stayed for dinner⁸ and, during the war, sometimes stayed the night, when her family home on the Eeuwige Laan had been requisitioned by the Germans.⁹ After the war Gisèle kept in touch with my grandparents and regularly visited my grandmother whenever she was in Bergen.

⁵That does not mean they themselves felt they were active in the resistance. They never spoke about it of their own accord. Puck brushed it off to me with: "Well, there were so many people doing things the Germans didn't allow, that's just how it was."

⁶Puck about this: "We rang the bell and had to turn around straight away, didn't get a glass of water, nothing." Chris later told her granddaughter Naomi that she actually desperately needed the toilet, but that wasn't possible. Presumably neither of them knew at the time that there were people in hiding in the house.

⁷If Roland Holst found the shop door closed, he concluded that it must be Sunday and walked through the garden to the back door to see if anyone was home. I experienced this myself more than once. As a five-year-old I was fetched from the living room by my grandfather "to come and shake hands with Mr Roland Holst". I remember him looking me deep in the eyes as he did so. See also the photograph of my grandfather behind the counter, taken by Lucebert for a Liber Amicorum on the occasion of Roland Holst's 80th birthday.

⁸See "Gisèle en haar onderduikers" (Gisèle and the people she hid), p. 35. It was a fact that my grandmother was a wonderful cook, but that Gisèle "was given so much to eat" that she "almost exploded" was no doubt due to that, not because my grandmother piled her plate so high. Mieke van Son-Broers was very particular about good manners and would never have done such a thing.

⁹I know this from Puck van Son, who was never very happy about these stays, because "then I had to give up my room again". She was six years younger than Gisèle and found her "arrogant". Puck was a very independent, creative free spirit who followed her own path in life and had little time for convention.

On the making of the painting

I do not know who took the initiative for the portrait. My mother, Ans van Son, thought at the time that Gisèle did it because she was bored, since she was not allowed to work. Later she concluded that it must also have been a kind of repayment for the food parcels.

Karin was born on 10 November 1942, so in the spring she was about six to seven months old. Not an age for posing at length. A photographer therefore took a large number of black-and-white photographs of her beforehand, wearing the dress, sitting in an ordinary high chair and playing with an antique pepper pot (see example photo) to make sure she would sit still for a while. In the painting, these became a few daisies. Karin had exceptionally thin, slow-growing hair; to stimulate the growth of what little she had, it had been cut short like a little boy's. To make her look like a girl all the same, it was decided to have her wear a kind of bonnet in the painting. I doubt it ever really existed; Gisèle probably made it up herself.

The embroidery (smocking) on the dress was undoubtedly made by my mother, who was good at it. The dress itself was probably made by someone else: my mother absolutely could not have done that. We think it was made by Karin's aunt, Puck van Son.

Whether the Hindelopen chair really existed, I do not know. I had never seen this chair before. The same goes for the rest of the background: I suspect Gisèle invented it herself and wanted to experiment with motifs from what was then called "folk art".¹⁰

Karin also sat for a few sessions, probably in the garden of Gisèle's parents' house. Of course, again with something in her hands to keep her a little still. In the spring of 1943 she did not yet have her front teeth. Gisèle painted them in a year later, as had been agreed beforehand. To my knowledge, the painting was signed straight away in 1943. During the war it hung in a place where strangers never came, so Gisèle ran no risk. After the war it simply hung in the living room of our home above the shop on the Ritsevoort in Alkmaar.

¹⁰I deduced this from a passage in the book "De Bergensche School" by D.A. Klomp (1942), p. 227 ff.