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Dutch Look Poor After Gay Belgium.

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Newsletter:

Dutch Look Poor After Gay Belgium

By Klaus Mann

AMSTERDAM—A traveller coming from Belgium will find this country comparatively poor. In Brussels, there seems to be plenty of everything—from silk shirts and leather shoes to typewriters and grand pianos, from French liquors and perfumes to paté de foie gras and fancy patisseries. The food in first-rate Brussels restaurants is better, and not more expensive, than in fabulous Switzerland. The capital of Belgium is today one of the most prosperous, indeed, luxurious places in Europe.

As for the Netherlands, life here is positively on the austere side. You may see some pleasant things displayed in shop windows but when you try to buy yourself a cigar or a bottle of Bols you are out of luck. It's all strictly rationed, and there isn't quite enough of anything. I was told that 3,000,000 chairs would be needed to refurnish Dutch homes, while only 300,000 chairs are available.

EMPIRE NO HELP

The contrast between Holland and Belgium remains somehow astonishing, even though there are obvious reasons for the former's relative poorness and the latter's relative wealth. First of all, Belgium has been making a lot of money out of her Congo possessions, while the Netherlands has had, and is having, trouble with her empire in the Pacific.

Second, Holland suffered infinitely more than Belgium during the final phase of the war. For while the Germans evacuated Belgium without any prolonged resistance, they held out in certain Dutch areas. It was during those months, late in 1944 and early in 1945, that the Dutch in the not yet liberated zones (which included most of the major cities) exhausted all their supplies and faced actual starvation. Amsterdamers remember the days when they had to pay 20 guilders (10 dollars) for a pound of bread if they could get it at all, and when people fainted or died of hunger in the streets.

MANNA FROM HEAVEN

Finally the salvation came from heaven, as it were with U. S. planes dropping massive packages containing candy, corned beef and other articles. It was like a last-minute miracle—welcomed with tears of joy and gratitude. In Amsterdam the first anniversary of the great event, April 28, was celebrated as an official holiday. "We'll never forget what you Americans have done for us," Dutch friends assured me. "Those food packages from the sky actually saved our lives!"

Things have picked up in the Netherlands since that critical period of spring, 1945. True, such badly damaged cities as The Hague and Rotterdam will not be the same again for many years to come. But as for Amsterdam, it has hardly been touched by bombs. Holland's busiest and biggest city appears at first sight practically unchanged.

There it is, grey, noisy, hard-working old Amsterdam, with the dark, smelly water of its "grachten," a system of channels reminiscent of Venice, with its endless columns of bicyclists and its hundreds of organgrinders. There are more bicycles and more huge wheeled music boxes in this city than in all the other European capitals combined. It is alive with buxom, fair-haired girls.

MONARCHY STRONG

The prestige of the royal family is as undisputed now as it was before the war. Plump, intelligent Juliana is about as popular as her mother, even though people are a trifle disappointed that the Crown Princess has not given birth to an heir while producing one little princess after another.

If the political situation here is less precarious and less explosive than in most other liberated countries, it may be partly due to the stabilizing influence of the monarchic system. Even the Communists—not a very potent element in the public life of this nation—carefully avoid attacking the Queen. As for the other liberal groups, they are becoming more and more respectable, now that they hold most of the key positions in the government.