

Hugo Broers

# PENOZE HUGO

Memoirs of the legendary  
Red Light District gangster

De Kring Publishers



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Warmoesstraat 73. The Broers' family lived on the first floor, above the sign of café Mexico Ranch. © Stadsarchief Amsterdam, foto eind 1955

# Warmoesstraat

I was born on April 11, 1957 at Warmoesstraat 73, between the bars and the hookers. The house is still there. From the street side you can't see how big it is. It has a huge back house. Above us lived Klaverstijn, who owned café Leentje further up the street, a cozy old-fashioned pub. Below us lived the amazing Appie de Jong. His café, Mexico Ranch, was on the ground floor.

There were five of us: my parents, two brothers and myself, the middle one. Two older brothers and an older sister had already left home. I was a greedy baby, my mother told me: 'When you sucked my nipples, it was as if a pincer was attached to them. How that hurt! You sucked everything up.'

More families with many children lived in the Warmoesstraat, such as the Teters family. One of those guys later became a good boxer. My friends and I were out all day, playing in empty houses and watching the hookers on Oudekerksplein. Nannie was one of the first hookers I got to know. She was a neighbour, a guy who had become a woman. A very nice, big woman. She lived above café Leentje. Who wanted to fuck a guy? But she was so sweet. Many guys who came drunk from nightclub Ponderosa in the Warmoesstraat would go to her and say afterwards: 'Wow, never in my life have I had such a good blow job!'

In summer, life took place on the streets. I still remember Aunt Gre sitting in front of her hotel, or Aunt Trees, who owned a café on the corner of Koningsstraat. Aunt Riek was the loudmouth of the Nieuwmarkt and always sat in front of her café *De tramhalte*. When the women weren't sitting on the sidewalk, they were hanging out of the window. They

kept an eye on everything through ‘spies’ – mirrors on a handle attached to the window frame. You don’t see those things anymore. As I got older, my mother’s spy proved very useful to see if a cop was coming.

Those mothers, aunts and grandmothers were usually cleaning and washing. Washing machines and hoovers were for the rich, with us everything went by hand. Rugs were whisked out of the window and mops and cloths were squeezed out above the street. You had to look up all the time when you walked outside. The laundry nearby was expensive and it didn’t get clean, my mother thought. As a child, I was washed in a big tub, but not every day. We didn’t get a shower until I was six. We did not have central heating. In winter, there were oil stoves at home that provided little heat. I also remember getting a telephone, which was special. Now people are talking to their phones all day long. In the old days, if someone walked down the street talking to himself, you were dealing with a madman.

I could hear exactly which neighbourhood someone was from. People from the Jordaan sounded different than those from the Red Light District, from the Kinker-neighbourhood or from the Zeedijk, Amsterdam’s biggest slum in terms of drugs. Normally I didn’t leave my neighbourhood. Why should I? We only made an exception for our Ajax on the Middenweg; we climbed over the fence there to watch the matches. Amsterdam North was another planet that I certainly didn’t visit. At most, my friends and I occasionally took the ferry to look at the boats on the IJ river. We walked to the Tolhuis and the docks, less than twenty meters away, and later in the day took the ferry back to Central Station.

The rubbish in our street was swept up every day by street sweepers with long brooms. Many people dumped their rubbish in the canal. According to my mother, they were paupers and anti-socials. Even when it froze, everyone threw their

rubbish on the ice: garbage, rubbers, entire beds and filthy mattresses with piss stains. Locals cleaned the areas between the bridges so that we children could skate laps. Under the bridges the ice was thin, but if you skated hard enough you could slide just under the bridge without sinking through the ice. Unlucky people were fished out with a ladder.

It used to freeze more often. In my memory, we had a white Christmas every year. When there was snow, we made huge slides on the Nieuwmarkt and in the playgrounds. Flattening snow and sliding back and forth until such a track was as smooth as a mirror. The trick was to slide from start to finish. Neighbours used to shake glowing ashes from their coal stoves over it, so the oldies wouldn't break their necks. In winter, I wore clogs with old newspapers in them on the Waterlooplein. When it got warmer, I wore thin-soled plastic sandals. If you stepped on glass or a nail, it was immediately stuck in your foot. Still, most children wore them, because they cost nothing.

In summer, we fished rubbers out of the canal with a stick or a bamboo fishing rod. We handled those things very carefully, because we knew very well what was inside. After we had filled them with canal water, we tied them up and we waited for tour boats. From a bridge we waved innocently at the occupants, who waved back happily, and then we ran to the other side of the bridge and threw one of those condoms filled with water and grease into those boats. Tourists were English, French and Krauts, and everyone knew at the time that Krauts were 'wrong' because of the war. I must have been six or seven years old then. By the time I got to high school, I was wearing glasses, health insurance glasses. Soon they called me 'The Cross-Eyed'. Some of the older guys knew I'd start a fight when they called me that. They challenged me on purpose so they could beat the shit out of me. That's how I learned to fight.

Each neighbourhood had its own gang, kids of about six

or seven years old. There were girls among them too. We hardly ever fought, at most when playing football or – somewhat later – over stolen mopeds. And in the days after Christmas, when we collected Christmas trees to set on fire on New Year's Eve at the Nieuwmarkt. We collected them from the Kinker-neighbourhood and from the posh people in Old South. It was deadly serious because we wanted our fire to be the biggest in town. There was plenty of space on the Nieuwmarkt anyway. If there was a car in the square belonging to someone we didn't like, that too would go up in flames.

# Father

I wake up startled, scream and throw the covers off of me at lightning speed. Rats. My brothers and I stand up from our bed at the same time. At that moment, the bedroom door opens. I see my father's shadow. He has woken up to our screams and is coming towards us. 'Close that window!' I shout. He pulls my ear, says nothing and starts beating the crap out of me. My brothers dodge away.

Between the wall of our house and that of the neighbours, there was a gap of about twenty centimetres, a crack between the buildings. Everyone threw their junk in it; the ideal place for rats. At night, they crawled in through the kitchen window or the window of our bedroom. They always jumped on the top bunk, where I slept. I hated them. There were rat traps in the gap. If there were a few in there, my father or my big brother would pummel them to death with a hammer.

I was five or six years old, that year I went to primary school for the first time. My father rammed into me with his bare fists or hit me with one of those rock hard rubber window strips meant to block the wind. I tried to defend myself, but I was too small. There was no way I could beat him. My mother would try to stop him and stand between us.

'Stop it, Harm!' she would shriek. 'Don't hit my child!' She'd started screaming in Italian. Only then would he stop. He didn't answer either. He was completely unreachable to anyone in these moments.

My parents had three children twice, with twenty years



in between. For years my father taught me that my brothers and I were afterthoughts. My mother never said things like that. I think my two older brothers and my sister got a lot more beatings because my father was younger and stronger. They left the house as soon as they could, as did my three-year-old brother. Only my little brother was lucky, because he would not get beaten up at all, or very little. Was it because of the war that my father wasn't a kind man? Was it because he was half gypsy? Of the three remaining children, I suffered the most beatings. Why? At times I was an annoying kid, then I'd understand. But most of the time my father beat me for no reason at all.

My mother said that my father had had a difficult life. That he too had been beaten as a child. He had married her to escape the Germans. She was half-Italian and Mussolini was Hitler's best friend. Would he have married her if it wasn't for the war? I think he would have imagined a different life. Standing on the market with antiques was not his dream job. He preferred traveling and buying things. Or did he beat us senselessly because we were afterthoughts, kids who shouldn't have been there in the first place? Was he bothered by us? Any reason was good enough to hit us. He could be pissed off because it was raining, or because the weather was nice. My mother could have said something, or she hadn't said anything at all. It didn't matter. I could only hope that it passed quickly. That he'd get tired or distracted by something. But there weren't that many distractions in those days. We had an old-fashioned TV, a radio and a telephone, and my father was a good accordion player. Occasionally we'd get fed up with it.

If he had hit me with one of those weather-strips, I could not participate in gymnastics lessons at school because of all the blue and red skin marks. But mostly he was clever enough to take into account the clothes I wore when hitting

me. In summer, I wore shorts and a shirt with short sleeves. You bet there was nothing to see on my arms and legs then. But my back looked like hell. Fortunately, the mother of Romeo Kensmil, who later became top boxer at boxing school *Albert Cuyp*, knew what to do. This lovely woman had thirteen children. She saw those stretch marks on my back and gave me a Surinamese ointment that made them disappear faster. But not completely. I still see the scars when I look in the mirror. They have become thinner, like those lines you draw with a nail. What would they have looked like if not for that dear woman? I am still grateful to her and brought her a large bouquet of flowers with Romeo in 2020.

Whenever I'd be beaten black and blue again, I'd be embarrassed for my father, whom I actually wanted to be proud of. I felt pain, but over time I got used to the physical pain. But the mental pain didn't go away. Not then, not now. The pain never wears off. At school, the teachers didn't notice or pretended not to. Maybe they didn't want any bullshit or they just thought it was okay.

I started skipping school. More and more often letters came from school. That bastard of the Broers-family had missed class for the umpteenth time. Sometimes I had to write lines at home as punishment, which someone else secretly did for me in exchange for candy. My father never found out.

The first time he beat me up, I secretly cried. The more he hit me, the less I felt, until I felt nothing at all. They say that you forget misery, that you only remember the nice things, but I have not forgotten anything. I know exactly how I felt and what I felt. My father taught me a lot and he remained my father so I did love him, in a special way, when we went fishing together for instance. But still, all my life I have been tormented by that one question: why did he hit me like that? Loose hands seem to be hereditary, but I have

never hit women, children, the disabled, old people or animals. That, I honour. But I've made a career out of beating bastards, I must admit.