

## From Europe/ Netherlands

### Remembrance of things past

*In Zoutkamp, a fishing village in the north of the Netherlands, an old fisherwoman speaks about her youth and the changes she has seen*

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Those days, in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we suffered terrible poverty. The families were big—10 to 14 children—and we all had to work from early morning to late evening. When I was a kid, I had no time to play. After school, we were peeling shrimps, often till late in the evening. In the middle of the pile of shrimps was a bowl with water to wet our eyes to keep us awake.

When I was 13, I went to work in the sheds to remove mussel shells. This was done in secrecy, because child labour was illegal, and when the police came, we had to run and hide. We also had some income from grading sardines and bundling seaweed.

In fishing families, the mother played a central role. The fathers were most of the time at sea those days. Most women had a small store at home, where they sold sweets, snacks, soap and other small consumer items. These shops guaranteed a daily income for our basic needs. Nevertheless, it happened quite often that we children went to sleep without the evening meal, as there was no money to buy food. Particularly in the winter, times were very difficult. We had to buy our basic provisions on credit and then hope that in the fishing season the catch was good enough to repay our debts.

The government did not do much for us those days. There was a public work programme for unemployed men. The work was to carry sand from a ship. The work was so depressing and the food so bad that the men went on strike. But the government only told us to pray, so everything would become all right. The people did not believe this, but had no other choice than to continue.

The highlight of my youth was the yearly fair. A carousel was brought by ship and all of us children had by then already selected his or her horse to ride. On Saturday afternoon, we all went in our best clothes to the fair. There was also a beautiful doll, dressed in

lace, like a princess. We could look at her for hours.

Today all this has changed. Shrimp peeling is not done by the women of this village anymore. The shrimp trader in our village of those days is today the owner of the biggest shrimp business enterprise in Europe. It not only buys shrimps locally, but from all over the world. The shrimps are taken for peeling to Poland and Morocco, where wages are low, and labour and hygiene laws less strict. During the past years many of our fishermen have stopped fishing too, as they could not afford the high capital investments that fishing requires today. People are no longer poor these days, but, looking back, I often long again for those days. Despite all the poverty, life was much more sociable. We were always together and could still enjoy the small things of life. The village was much more alive and the fishery was what bound us all together.