

MORESNET

Opkomst en ondergang van een vergeten buurlandje (The Rise and Fall of a Forgotten Neighbouring Country) Philip DRÖGE

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A very rich zinc mine was located in the tiny territory of Moresnet (270 hectares). For 100 years (1816-1920), it was a condominium: governed by two countries simultaneously.

It all started with Jean-Jacques Dony, the engineer and inventor who made a portable bathtub for Napoleon. It was a rather ingenious type of bathtub: the water could be heated by an integrated system. This bathtub was made of zinc: therefore it would not rust and it was definitely much lighter than the usual bathtubs of iron or steel. Napoleon, who was ever sensitive to cold, took this bathtub with him on all his military campaigns, even up to Moscow and back.

Jean-Jacques Dony was from Liège in present day Belgium, but at that time it was all part of Napoleon's empire. A little to the east of Liege, is the small town Kelmis (or Calamine in French), where zinc ore has been found since Roman times. Both names are derived from the Latin name for zinc spar which is lapis calaminaris. While the ore was mined on a small scale for a long time, Dony's interest in large-scale mining stemmed from the new technology that more efficiently processed the ore in reduction furnaces he had designed.

In 1815 Napoleon was defeated in Waterloo and banned to the South Atlantic island, Saint Helena. The different representatives of the European governments met in Vienna, where they convened in order to agree on how to redraw the boundaries after the war. One idea was to create a buffer zone between the long-time rivals France and Germany. It was decided to enlarge the Netherlands to the South, so that it included what today is Belgium. There was a bit of discussion on whether the Eastern boundary should reach up to the Meuse or to the Rhine River. Of course both the Netherlands and Germany wanted to possess the zinc mine. Anyway, when the convention was signed and the respective countries sent people to set the boundary marker stones, it appeared that the area of Moresnet and Kelmis, in which the zinc mine is located, belonged to both: the Netherlands and Germany. Neither country wanted to give up this economically high-interest mining area. They decided on a temporary joint administration. This was the start of a long and difficult period for the inhabitants. They were stateless: not under German law, nor under Dutch law. For the sake of neutrality it was decided that the Code Napoleon would remain the law for Neutral Moresnet. The currency would be the French franc, not the guilder or the mark. The Moresnetters had no nationality, no voting rights... But on the other hand they did not have to pay any taxes and they were exempt from military service.

Such a particular situation attracted particular people. Distillers come from far and wide because they could make their brandies and liquor tax-free, then smuggle them out of the territory. Neutral Moresnet also attracted the crooks and thieves from all over Western Europe. Even though there were only a few thousand inhabitants, there were dozens of cabarets with entertainment and gambling. Since there were no taxes, there was no welfare, but the mining company paid for most of what is needed: school, infrastructure...

In 1830 the southern part of the Netherlands revolted, which led to the independence of Belgium. Moresnet, being located south of Maastricht, swaps the Dutch-German joint administration for a Belgian-German joint administration. The northern most tip of Moresnet, the Vaalserberg, became a common border point for 4 countries: Belgium, Netherlands, Germany and Neutral Moresnet (the 4-country point).

Meanwhile the inhabitants of Moresnet were Dutch, Belgians, Germans and Neutrals (the descendants of the initial population),

as well as some other nationalities. Over time some people started to feel a kind of a Moresnet identity, and when in the 1860's Europe came under the spell of philately, Dr. Wilhelm Molly designed stamps for Moresnet. This show of local identity and independence was not appreciated by either Belgium nor Germany, and the stamps disappeared. The few surviving stamps are worth fortunes.

Gambling is something from all times and all places. But gambling can range from bets on card playing in a backroom of a cabaret, to large-scale organised gambling as in the case for horse races. However when the aristocracy went to hot spring resorts for cures, they did not have much to do between the bathing sessions. Bored, they started to gamble in a high society meeting centre: the casino. The first casino was founded in Spa, a cure-resort some 30 km southwest of Moresnet. Baden, in Germany, and Monaco followed with their own casinos. Over time the old European monarchies evolved into more modern democracies and the respective legislations adjusted. Betting and gambling became regulated. But the legislation of Moresnet with the Napoleonic civil and penal code, could not evolve: Napoleon had died decades ago. Neutral Moresnet was stuck in an archaic military system which could not be adapted. Some clever entrepreneurs came to Moresnet to set up a casino: attracting upper class people from Aken in Germany, as well as from the bigger cities in Belgium, the Netherlands and even London. Both Belgium and Germany were upset by this black spot in their territories. They kept negotiating in order to seek a permanent solution for this outlaw territory, but none of them wanted to lose the mine resources. This led to repeated situations of negotiations and unsigned treaties.

Meanwhile, during the decennia around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, idealists thought that the European patchwork of languages confused the mutual understanding. These idealists thought it would be fantastic if there would be one universal language. They started to design independent artificial languages. Out of these the only one we still remember today is Esperanto. But such a language cannot become important if it is not spoken by many people. Maybe if there were a country which would adopt Esperanto as its official language, then gradually maybe more and more people and countries would join the movement. This, the idealists thought, would then lead to better communication and better understanding among nations and people. Gustave Roy, a French teacher and freemason, fluent in at least 7 languages, was one of the idealists seeking a home country for Esperanto. In Aken, he met Dr. Wilhelm Molly, who was immediately convinced that Esperanto should become the official language of Neutral Moresnet. Within a few years 140 Moresnetters mastered Esperanto, which was about 3 to 4% of the population. They even had an anthem in Esperanto. The government in Berlin was not much pleased by all this idealism and set out to counter all initiatives. Electricity and telephone lines were cut and banned, and soldiers were posted along the border of the territory. Life became difficult. Soon it was the First World War. Germany crossed Moresnet to invade Belgium such as to reach France from the North. After the war, the Treaty of Versailles assigned Moresnet to Belgium and Neutral Moresnet ended its existence on 10 January 1920.

The history of Moresnet is an interesting illustration of political logjam. Even though it was a mere 270 hectares, it is linked to the process of zinc smelting in reduction furnaces, to the origins of stamps and philately, to the history of casinos in Europe, as well as to Esperanto.