

RENSKE LEFT THE APOSTOLIC SOCIETY

“I only wanted one thing: TO LIVE MY OWN LIFE”

“It was one big game”, says Renske Doorenspleet (49) about the first 24 years of her life as a member of a closed, religious community. One day she makes a life-changing decision. “With a handshake my life as an Apostle’s child was over.”

Interview **ELINE DOLDERSUM** Photography **BART BRUSSE**

“It was a dreary day in May 1998, I was 24, when I decided to leave the Apostolic Society, a cult, as I would now call it. After years of hesitation, it was my partner Martin who gave the final push. Out of nowhere he asked me if I wanted to raise my children within the Apostolic Society. Although we had never thought about children before, I didn’t have to think for a second: ‘Absolutely not’. ‘What are we doing here then? We’ll get out’, replied Martin, who, like me, had grown up in this closed group. It was the end of the story for the community. With a few exceptions, the warm bond that had existed for more than twenty years quickly transformed into cold and distant contact. With one handshake my life as an ‘*Apostelkind*’ (Apostle’s child) was over. I was still in contact with one friend, because she also left. Yet we never spoke about that period together. It was too complicated, too painful, and too confusing.”

Contemporary Christ

“For generations my family grew up within the Apostolic Society, consisting of a group of 30,000 brothers and sisters across the Netherlands. Together, our task was to continue the work of Jesus, with ‘our Apostle’ as our great example. This Apostle was an ordinary man who lived in a villa in Bussum. Later his son succeeded him. He was a little bald and had glasses. His picture hung in our living room and bedrooms. He was our contemporary Christ, and we were His chosen ones. **Babies became God’s property, and in this way this man – who was the living God - took the place of the parents. We were his children, Apostle’s children.** At least three times a week we sang to him, we listened to his ‘wise words’, and we thanked him every day, in prayer. Everyone was excited when the Apostle came to visit. He was special, and so were we. This was instilled in us from a young age. There was a very intensive youth program. After school or after working hours, we were all expected to go to the ‘Building’ (not a ‘church’), and we also had to be there at the weekend. There were strict guidelines that dictated how we should behave, not only in the ‘outside world’ but also within the ‘Buildings’, that we could go on summer vacation for a maximum of two weeks, what clothes we should wear, also that you had to be present on the Apostle’s birthday. On that day there was a lot of excitement. Young people decorated his garden, they sang and praised him.”

Big secret

“The group cohesion, feeling of belonging, was enormous. We had our own language with terms and slogans used only within the Society, and we had our own customs

and manners. For example, every morning and evening we thanked the Apostle with a prayer; and when greeting someone, you shook hands for a long time while looking deeply into each other's eyes. When someone came in from 'outside', everyone knew immediately that he or she was 'not one of us'. What we did was secret. You didn't talk about it. Out of fear, shame, loyalty, confusion. There were at least ten other Apostle's children at my school, but no one knew we knew each other. There were two different lives that were strictly separated from each other, and that no one knew anything about **our religious lives**. I had friends outside the Society, I didn't say much to them either, **even though I was a very open child by nature**. I was often asked what I was so busy with in the evenings and weekends. I usually gave a vague answer, or I started about something else. **If I did say something, I was not believed. Due to disbelief, ignorance and indifference of outsiders, the group could remain hermetically sealed in an open country such as the Netherlands.** Within the Society nobody knew about each other's jobs or hobbies; what you did in daily life, in the outside world, was not important. When we were together, inside the Buildings, we shared one task: to become better people and to make the world 'lighter', together. **There was no afterlife, so we had to fulfil our task here on earth, discussing not the Bible or another old, sacred text, but relying on the weekly letters with new life lessons from our own Leader, the living Christ."**

First cracks

"As a child, I experienced that time as quite pleasant. If we sang songs, we would be inundated with compliments. There was warmth within the group, and we did everything together. It felt like one big family. **Still, from the age of 5 I had the feeling that something wasn't right. What was said often did not correspond to reality. If you stated facts, they said you had misunderstood. And if you felt something other than what was prescribed, then it was said you hadn't felt it in the right way. You had to learn to feel what our Apostle felt and meant, because he knew what was good, and how to become a better person. You experienced a constant tension that you couldn't get rid of, because you saw everything wrong, all the time: the facts and own observations, but also own feelings and memories. Your own thoughts and feelings were constantly questioned, leading to endless doubt of everything. That doubt was good, because then you would seek guidance from the Apostle. That was the intention, and he would make you a 'new person'. I knew that non-apostolic children had a different life. But Society life took up so much of your time that there was no room to think about what was going on. Plus, you felt special, and thought you needed this faith.** The first **real** cracks appeared around the age of ten. I felt less and less comfortable with services where the whole group was crying over lyrics and songs. I joined in because everyone else was doing it, but I felt more and more resistance. This shared emotion with crying was a kind of power tool to strengthen the group feeling. The Apostle and local leaders would regularly call someone on the platform to humiliate this adult or child. This happened, for example, when you did not want to end a relationship with a non-apostolic lover, or because you had cheated, but also if you did not sing along loud enough, or if your love for the Apostle was perceived not to be sufficient, not devoted enough. I was in that room, I was there, every time. **It happened to me more than once, such public humiliation, once in front of a hall with two thousand people.** That felt so wrong, but nobody did anything. There was no space to develop yourself or your own personality. Everything was in the service of

the group, so you also crossed your own boundaries. Perhaps most confusingly, the moment you're in it, you have no idea what you're in the middle of. And the moment you step out, you have no idea what happened."

Apostle's child

"In the first years after I had left the group, I just wanted one thing: to live my own life. I married Martin, we had two children and moved to England. Twenty years later, the past started to gnaw at me again. I wanted clarity. About the Apostolic Society, but also about how it has shaped me as a person. **The biggest problem was that nothing has been written about the Society. Not by journalists, not by academics or policy makers. There is nothing in the public space. There is no information, which makes it difficult to place your own memories, and impossible to understand your own experiences. Since my adolescence, I have collected thousands of internal documents myself, and kept them in 7 large boxes. Finally, I decided to read and analyse everything to explore how the Society has developed since 1830, with a focus on the period after World War II.** I think one of the most difficult discoveries is that it was one big game, a theatre play, in which we all participated. Within the Society, everything was scripted from start to finish. We were indoctrinated. There was control over our feelings, behaviour, emotions, and information. As a result, you no longer have any idea what belongs to your own personality and what is caused by this specific training. To give you an example, as children we were told that we were nothing and lonely and selfish, and that we would always need the Leader (as the 'Living Norm') and the group (as 'practice place' or 'training ground'). As a child you take that as truth, but now I see that it was all orchestrated. I was also shocked when Martin and I put our stuff together and started to compare the material from that period. Martin grew up in the Apostolic Society on the other side of the country, but he had exactly the same material as I did. It's all thought out, so very detailed. That has left its mark. I learned to lose my own identity, as life revolved around the Apostle, the group and the mission. That's why I still find it difficult to choose for myself. Still, I decided to write my book *Apostle Child*, because I wanted to understand the history of the Society, and therefore – indirectly- also myself. And I now know – from the many hundreds of long letters I have received – that there are many more Apostle's children who struggle with this past. But I also think it's important to break the taboo by giving people the opportunity to read for themselves what has happened within this sect over the past seventy-five years. **And I sincerely hope there will be more openness soon.**"

Power of a book

"My parents read the book a month before it was published. My father had to cry. 'Finally, someone who has the courage', he said 'finally my story is also being told.' My mother said: 'The book is correct.' My parents have always supported me. They also left for a year but returned to the group. They have devoted their entire lives to it, with their social network. The fact that you love your parents makes it extra difficult to write a book like this, but it had to be. This story had to be told and shared. It was not easy to delve into this past, question things that were always so obvious to me, discover painful facts and hear harrowing stories from other Apostle's children. But I

am grateful that the story has now been written, and that the book has had such a massive impact. After the publication, more and more people started to have courage to share their own experiences. Readers went to their family members, started to talk. They also went to psychologists and psychiatrists because they finally understood why they weren't feeling well. This book gives them the confirmation that they are not crazy. This really happened. More targeted treatments are now possible as they now know the facts. Sharing knowledge is important, not just around this group, but closed groups in general. There is hardly any knowledge about the impact of religion, both positive and negative. I've also received letters from people of other closed groups, not only religious but also political groups. The growing resistance by readers ultimately resulted in public apologies, an investigation, a new hotline, a complaints committee, and financial compensation for the suffering caused by the Society. The apostleship has been abolished and replaced by new leadership. I myself have not asked for compensation, I think it is more important that the story comes out. The society is now smaller with about twelve thousand members, but it still exists. Abuse of power does not only occur in religious groups, of course, but also in the fields of politics, sports, art, and music. In my opinion, there should be more debate about the place of closed groups with coercive control in a democratic, open country such as the Netherlands, particularly when there are children involved. A child does not have a choice, an adult does. I would like to say: don't let yourself be locked up and abused, no matter how beautiful the reward seems to be. Look carefully, also in your own mirror, and listen not only to others and your thoughts, but also to your feelings and intuition. Be curious. Don't cover but dis-cover. What I want to pass on to my own children is that they are enough. May they find their own way, and may wander and get lost, surrounded by loved ones, just like I'm now trying to do myself. I am glad that I chose for myself. I was us. Now I'm just me, Renske."

Apostelkind € 22,99 (Balans)



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PS the black letters ended up in the final version, published on 20 October 2022