

Nadia Comvalius – Transcript Translation (ENG)

With Ernestine Comvalius and Pearl Pengel

VO

Welcome to, Met Terugwerkende Kracht (With Retroactive Force), a podcast and audio tour from Utrecht University in honour of International Women's Day. We are podcasters Corinne Heyrman, Marieke van de Ven, and Jozien Wijkhuijs, and we are taking you on a tour through Utrecht. Along the way, we will make stops at places with an underexposed history and listen to people with a story to tell. We learn about the history of intersectional feminism in the city and at the university. At this stop, Ernestine Comvalius and Pearl Pengel, at the Academiegebouw on Domplein number 29. They tell us about their aunt, Nadia Comvalius.

The Academiegebouw is the spot where all academic ceremonies such as graduations, PhD defences, and inaugural lectures take place. My name is Marieke, and in this episode we present the story of Nadia Comvalius. The first black woman to graduate as a doctor from Utrecht University.

Nadia Comvalius is 96 years old and lives in the USA. She is not able to tell her story herself. That is why I'm speaking to Ernestine Comvalius and Pearl Pengel. Both studied at Utrecht University, just like Nadia did. Ernestine now lives in Amsterdam, and Pearl in Connecticut, USA. We meet online, so that both can tell me about their aunt, Nadia Comvalius.

Ernestine

Aunt Nadia was born in Suriname, in a family that always emphasised the importance of education.

VO

This is Ernestine. She tells me about her grandfather who was a teacher in Suriname, and who worked his way up to become head of his school.

He always taught his children, boys and girls, that he expected them to get the best out of themselves. That is also the influence that Aunt Nadia had on us.

VO

Pearl adds that grandmother also played an important role.

Pearl

My grandmother is actually the one who taught her children, and myself and Ernestine too, to read. Her favourite book was the Bible. So, Stine and I always talked about 'your sister' (*je zus*), but it was Jesus (*Jezus*) all along. (laughs)

Ernestine

Yes, that's right, it took me a while to realise that the book wasn't about a girl who could walk on water.

Pearl

Yes, but you must also remember that, if we go to slavery for a moment, during slavery, it was forbidden for black people to read and write. It was just not allowed, so really, to still learn to read and write was almost a form of resistance. It was also the only way to actually improve your situation.

After the Second World War, Queen Wilhelmina declared, via the Atlantic Charter, that Suriname would start the process of decolonisation, and that because of this several people would also be given the opportunity to go and study in the Netherlands at Dutch universities and in other courses with the aim of then returning to Suriname to help with its development.

Ernestine

You could say that she was in one of the first batch of Surinamese students who did that.

I can remember conversations with her about what life was like in the Netherlands, in Utrecht, at the time. She had a lot of trouble with December 5th in particular, with Sinterklaas and black Pete. During this time, they would sometimes lock themselves in their house and refuse to go outside because it was hurtful to be harassed on the street. For me, it was interesting to learn how this was experienced back then – we're talking about the late 1940s – and that it has, in fact, always been experienced as reprehensible by people of colour.

Pearl

She also explained to us how very shocked she was when she came to the Netherlands and realised that some Dutch people did not know where Suriname was. They thought that that people in Suriname walked around without clothes on, all those kinds of things. That shocked her. That is what she told me. Because, she said, in Suriname we know everything about the Netherlands; where the Rhine enters the Netherlands, we know about William the Silent (Willem de Zwijger), we know about all of it. While the Dutch know absolutely nothing about us. That shocked her because she thought we were part of the Dutch Kingdom, which we still were in 1947. Why don't we know anything about each other? Why is it so one-sided? That is something that has always occupied her.

Ernestine

Yes, she has experienced how colonialism and colonial thinking work and how one-sided it is – who puts themselves in the centre. So, well, of course we also noticed that later when we came here, in 1964, and '58. The head of the school [I attended] did not know, or was surprised, that I could speak Dutch. In 1964. The head of the school. So yes (*laughs*) there is still a long way to go in that respect.

VO

After Nadia Comvalius graduated from Utrecht in 1952, she travelled and eventually settled in the US. There she specialised in gynaecology and was involved in the development of the contraceptive pill. She also held walk-in consultations on sexuality and family planning.

Both Ernestine and Pearl lived with Nadia for some time. Nadia Comvalius worked in a hospital at the time, but she also had her own practice.

Ernestien

We were teenagers then, we were allowed to experience all this as teenagers. And, of course, you remember that. We admired my aunt very much. We saw how hard she worked – she was busy day and night. And yet she also made time for us. She thought it was important to take us along to Broadway, to restaurants... She was really invested in our general development. And we learned how to run a medical practice. We sometimes had contact with patients, we really assisted her, and we earned some money on the side. That's another thing that was great for our own feeling of independence. So, yes, she really was our idol in that respect.

Pearl

She was just brilliant. And she's also not someone who has ever seen herself as a victim, you know. She has always been very grateful for all the opportunities she's been given.

Ernestine

I have an anecdote that I would like to share. [while working at the hospital] She discovered that some of her patients were in wing A and others were in the opposite wing, and she found shuffling between them rather tiresome. So at some point she brought it up. She said: 'I would like my patients to be placed together'.

Well, they did, but it wasn't until a few years later that they explained to her that they were shocked at the time because the hospital wing was divided by race, between white and black. And so, up until she requested it was customary for patients to be segregated in the hospital. So she, by chance – well, of course not by *chance*, but because of her way of thinking, she abolished segregation in the hospital.

VO

Everybody was also welcome at her own house.

Aunt Nadia hosted many different parties in her house that all kinds of people attended. But what she also found important is that we made special food that we knew from Suriname. So she also always propagated her culture. We learned very early on to make those special dishes too, from pom to pasty (*pastei*), you name it. And connected to people like that. People who would otherwise never have eaten anything from Suriname, or who didn't even know where Suriname was. She always made connections.

Pearl

The interaction, I'm going to say it in English, the interaction between people. Between people in your family. Between people of different colours and different races. All of those things help to deepen your understanding of what it is that you need to achieve.

And my aunt Nadia has always seen it that way. She has friends from all over the world. She has always had friends from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. It is often not only a matter of resistance, but also of understanding.

VO

Understanding each other. Seeing each other's strengths and supporting one another, and not losing sight of one's vulnerabilities at the same time.

Ernestine

She also had her vulnerabilities, of course, because she is a human being. At work she had to be strong. She couldn't afford to make any mistakes. She was bright, clear, *phew*, a tough professional. But when we were together, yes, we could also cry together. People often say: black women are strong. And then I think: you don't actually treat us as if we were human when you say that. We have all the emotions that any other human being has. But it's true, given our position in society you have to develop a certain kind of strength to make it.

VO

At the moment Pearl is taking care of her aunt, and I wonder how Nadia is doing now.

Pearl

She is doing very well. She is 96 years old and she has had several strokes, but she is still very happy. And I often have to laugh because she's still got that whole personality that she has, that fieriness, that she still has.

Ernestine

Yes, she still has her spunk. She is very sharp, so she follows everything and understands everything.

VO

The family stays in touch and Ernestine recently visited America.

Ernestine

And those are the beautiful memories you keep with you until the end. Supporting each other, the stories she tells about the old days... Yes, those are the precious, quality moments. That's what we take with us and that's what our children will take away too.

Pearl

The fact that we know, by looking at her example, that actually there's nothing that we can't do, nothing that we can't strive for.

Ernestine

In short, this lady, we could talk about her for a very long time – she is not in the books of *Who is Who* for nothing. It is important that women really realise that they can study anything they want and that they have the capacity to do so. That is my aunt's message.