

Preface

I was born on Christmas eve. My mother went into labor on 24 December 1966. My father brought her to Saint Elisabeth's Hospital in Turnhout, a town in the North of Belgium, where I live.

Most likely, the senior gynecologist, doctor Ferdinand – Nand – Peeters, was glad he wasn't on duty that day. Christmas eve is a special day for a religious man like him. Since my mother's pregnancy had gone smoothly, and no complications were expected, his assistant, Doctor Rudolf Snauwaert, attended to her. My mother didn't mind: Dr Peeters had a somewhat surly reputation in Turnhout. He and his cigar were inseparable, even during deliveries. And ashes had been known to fall into the sensitive area. His nickname, Nand Cigar, is still a byword in town.

I was born that evening at 7.15 PM. Officially, I was Dr Peeters' patient. Who could have known that 45 years on, the same man would reappear in my life like a ghost, and would give me the greatest scoop of my career as a journalist?

While Ferdinand Peeters was celebrating Christmas with his family in 1966, few of the people nearest to him knew of the pioneering contribution he had made to the development of the contraceptive pill in 1959-1960.

In Turnhout and in the region of the Campine, Dr Peeters is best known as a caring and courageous gynecologist; the guardian angel of thousands of women who stumbled from one pregnancy – and often miscarriage – into the next. In his long career he dealt with some thirty thousand pregnancies.

He was also an engaged man: supporter of Flemish emancipation, chairman of the 'Davidsfonds'¹. In his younger years he wrote a Book of Games for the Catholic youth movement KSA. He was co-founder of a nursing school, was active in parents' committees of schools, held almost daily lectures in the entire region, frequented scientific conferences and gatherings and was, on top of all that, a father of six.

He died in 1998, having suffered a stroke ten years earlier, which had cut him off completely from the outside world. All this time his family and children remained mostly oblivious to his role in the development of the Pill.

1 A Christian organization dedicated to the emancipation and cultural education of the Flemish people, including its own publishing house.

In 2008, I was doing some research for an exhibition about the history of my town. I wanted to get off the beaten track and surprise visitors with stories they had never heard before. The fact that Turnhout has a rich paper industry (Brepols) and that Dr. Paul – Baron – Janssen, founder of Janssen Pharmaceutica, was born there, is well known. But people would be amazed to learn that the richest man in New-Amsterdam came from Turnhout, as did Peter Paul Rubens... and Kurt Cobain. Or that Sitting Bull's peace pipe lies in Turnhout and that Wild Bill Hickok was holding cards made in Turnhout when he was shot in the back in Deadwood. Let 'em try and top that! History should be a lot of things, but never boring.

After a copious Christmas dinner, my father-in-law, Jacques Wittebolle, told me he had known a man from Turnhout who was 'the real father of the Pill'. His name: Doctor Nand Peeters.

Confabulation is not one of the traits I would ascribe to my father-in-law, but that time I thought the drink had gotten the better of him, or he was trying to pull my leg. He did have a long career with Janssen-Pharmaceutica and its sister company Ortho Pharmaceutica; but still, it seemed unlikely that a well-known figure like Nand Peeters would have such a big surprise up his sleeve.

A few days later, my father-in-law presented me with a small stack of photocopies. They were given to him by his recently deceased friend Doctor Marcel Van Roy. They were from a catalogue of an exhibition in 1996. In the summer of that year the Deutsche Hygiene-Museum in Dresden had organized the exhibition *Die Pille – von der Lust und von der Liebe*². The trigger for this had been the 35th anniversary of the development of Anovlar, the first European birth control pill, and the first clinically applicable one in the world, thanks to its light(er) dosage.

The article not only mentions the name of Marcel Van Roy, a clinical biologist with his own laboratory in Turnhout, but also that of Dr. Ferdinand Peeters and his assistant-doctor Reimond Oeyen. Apparently, they had presented the German firm Schering (now Bayer) with groundbreaking test results in 1960, which had led to the development of Anovlar, a few months later.

The three protagonists were no longer among the living, but Marc Peeters – the eldest son of the main character – granted me access to his father's hitherto undisclosed archive. In March 2010, I published my findings in a special edition (celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Pill) of the Flemish weekly newsmagazine

2 Sieg, S. (1996), 'Anovlar' – die erste europäische Pille: Zur Geschichte eines Medikaments', in Staube, G., & Vieth, L. (eds.), *Die Pille: Von der Lust und von der Liebe*, Berlin, Rowolht, 131-144.

*Knack*³ – of which I was chief editor at the time. My conclusion was that Dr. Ferdinand Peeters deserved the title of *stepfather* of the Pill. He had raised someone else's neglected child: the first Pill, of which the initial purpose was to alleviate 'menstrual disturbances', came on the market in 1957. and was developed by the American Gregory Pincus, so the history books say. But this Pincus-pill had fatal flaws and Dr. Peeters and his team were the ones who made it 'viable'.

That article was the basis for a section of the great exhibition on the history of Turnhout⁴, and for the TV documentary *De pil van dokter Peeters (Doctor Peeters' Pill)*⁵, in which, together with director Bart Beckers, I introduced the first women Peeters had used for his tests. A heartrending and heartwarming experience.

The documentary clarified many things, especially after a visit to the Schering archive in Berlin where all the crucial documents have been preserved.

But some questions couldn't be answered: why didn't Nand Peeters advertise his contribution and why is it almost completely ignored in the scientific world?

Nothing is what it seems in this wondrous adventure. For me, as a journalist, a native of Turnhout and a 'patient' of Doctor Nand Peeters, it has been a very personal quest.

The realization that the first modern women of Europe (Nand Peeters test subjects) lived in my own town and region and that the man, who had made such a groundbreaking contribution to the development of the Pill, was my own mother's gynecologist, didn't simplify my work. How many distance must there be between an investigative journalist and his subject?

In 2012 the peer reviewed results of my research appeared in the important scientific journal *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care*.⁶ For me, this is proof that my conclusions were not exaggerated. In the article, the 'stepfather' of the Pill is even called a '*forgotten founding father*' of the Pill.

Afterwards, witnesses turned up with an explanation for Nand Peeters reticence. And slowly but surely the story developed into a remarkable image of Flanders – and Turnhout – in the sixties and seventies. With direct links to world history.

3 Broeck, K. van den (2010), 'De vergeten stiefvader van de pil', in *Knack Extra*, March 5, 2010.

4 Broeck, K. van den (2012), 'Kwamen de eerste moderne vrouwen van Europa uit Turnhout?', in Broeck K. van den & Sas B. (red.) (2012), *Turnhout Terminus — Turnhout Centraal. Erfgoed & mythen uit Turnhout en de Kempen*, Turnhout, Brepols: 133-202.

5 Broeck, K. van den & Beckers B. (2012), *De pil van dokter Peeters* (tv documentary), first broadcast on CANVAS, 8 March 2012, Turnhout/Geel, Screensavers & Korps 12 Production.

6 Broeck, K. van den, Janssens D., & Defoort P. (2012). 'A forgotten founding father of the Pill: Ferdinand Peeters, MD', in *The European Journal of Contraception & Reproductive Health Care* 17:321-328.

The cherry on the cake was the recognition on 4 April 2014 by the listeners of Radio 1 of the Flemish public broadcasting company (VRT). By a large majority, it elected 'Dr. Peeters' Pill' as the most important Belgian invention of all times. Even though the importance of this kind of recognition is not to be overestimated, it did sweep away all my personal objections to writing this book and making the details of Dr. Peeters' achievements known to an even wider audience.

I want to express my gratitude to everyone who has helped me with my work. The Peeters family, and especially Marc – who has done an extraordinary amount of preparatory work. Most others are mentioned by name in the book, but I want to thank Bart Beckers, and also Rik Van Cauwelaert for allowing me the time to do this research for *Knack*. Thanks also to my family for the support and my publisher for the confidence.

This book was born out of a documentary. In 2011, documentary film maker Bart Beckers and I followed in the footsteps of Marc Peeters, Nand Peeters' oldest son, in his attempt to uncover his father's secrets.

We went to Berlin to examine the archives of Schering (Bayer) and found convincing evidence that Dr. Peeters had, indeed, developed the first clinically applicable contraceptive pill.

In Belgium, we interviewed the women who had served as test subjects for Nand Peeters' pill in 1959. They all remember him as their guardian angel.

The documentary, an independent production by Screensavers (supported by Antwerp Province, the city of Turnhout and Pharma.be), was first shown on Belgian television on March 8, 2012 (Women's Day) and had several reruns. It laid the foundation for the election of doctor Peeters' Pill as 'best Belgian invention ever' by the listeners of Flemish Radio 1 in April 2014. The original Dutch-language edition of the book was published in October 2014.

Karl van den Broeck