

Van Beeren, Bet (1902–67), Dutch bar owner. Bet, the ‘Queen of the Zeedijk’, was the owner of the popular ‘t Mandje (the Basket) on the Zeedijk (sea dike) in Amsterdam. This street, close to the old harbour, has for long had a reputation for illicit pleasures, foremost among them prostitution and booze. It was the place for sailors to spend their money on arrival in Amsterdam.

In the 1930s, Chinese and Surinamese entered the district and introduced ethnic restaurants and jazz music. Drugs arrived some time later. In this street, several bars were tended by dykes who had made their money in prostitution. Some of these bars catered to a public not only of prostitutes and their johns, but also gays and lesbians. Gay men could take a chance with the sailors and working-class men who did not have enough money to pay for a whore or were too drunk to be accepted as a client.

Lesbians might pick up a prostitute or an adventurous lady.

Among the dykes of the dike Bet Van Beeren was by far the most famous. She was from a poor and large Jorjaan family. After a labyrinthine career on and around the streets of central Amsterdam, she started her own bar, The Basket, in 1927. It was a typical small Amsterdam pub, at most 40 square metres overall. Only after World War II did the bar get a reputation in gay and lesbian circles. She herself made much of her support for the Dutch Resistance against the German occupation and the help she offered after the war to the poor children of the Zeedijk neighbourhood.

Van Beeren was instrumental in developing the reputation of her bar. She was the archetype of a gin-drinking, cigar-smoking and motorbike-riding dyke who wore leather jackets and sailor suits. She was a tough woman who defended both her many lovers against other pretenders as well as the gay boys against violent seamen or obtrusive police-officers. The great day at the Basket was Queen’s Day, since 1948 celebrated on 30 April. This festive occasion had not yet developed into the big street party it is nowadays, but in some places gay men and women could go in drag and dance as same-sex couples (which was strictly forbidden on other days). The police checked bars regularly for the presence of gay and lesbian traces at that time, and if they found any, they would withdraw their licenses. Although gay drag and dancing were allowed in other venues on Queen’s Day, The Basket became famous because of this. Normally, it was strictly forbidden by Van Beeren, who had rigid ideas about proper behaviour. Except for Queen’s Day, kissing and touching were taboo for gay lovers. As with many so-called depraved women, Van Beeren was ambivalent about her own morality and developed a penchant for the good works of a largely sexophobic organisation like the Salvation Army, which she allowed to solicit in her bar.

The Basket was not a gay bar, as it attracted a mixed crowd. But it developed a gay and lesbian reputation at that time because of the availability of ‘normal’ men and women who did not object to a gay or lesbian trick. It was a time when ‘normalcy’ was an enticement for queens and butches. Van Beeren contributed much to the gay reputation of her bar by her overwhelming presence. She turned the Basket into an ‘international museum’. Its walls were completely covered with memorabilia like pictures, cards and letters and its ceiling with cut-off ties and belts that were taken – willingly or unwillingly – from her clients. Many stories about her unpredictable behaviour added to her fame. She was said often to have disappeared for extended periods when she had found another ‘femme’-lover.

Van Beeren was Amsterdam’s most famous dyke of this century. After her death in 1967 her straight sister Greet continued The Basket in her spirit. With the invasion of drugs and criminality in the 1970s, she was no longer able to keep the bar open and closed it in 1983. Efforts to get the interior on the list of monuments and to establish a gay museum in the building failed. But the bar still exists as it was and was reopened in the week of the Amsterdam Gay Games in 1998, while a replica of the interior was exhibited in the city’s Historical Museum. There is now a permanent replica of her bar in the Amsterdam Historical Museum.

Tibbe Bosch (ed.), *Bet van Beeren: koningin van de Zeedijk* (Amsterdam, 1977).

Gert Hekma