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Stuart Robles de Medina, Pengel, 1974

★ Stuart Robles de Medina ★ Pengel ★ 1974 ★

# Pengel

ISBN  
978-3-00-077525-3

Edition  
300  
280×335 mm  
136 pages

74€

Images  
The estate of Stuart Robles de Medina

Concept,  
Transcription &  
Translation  
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Made with the support of  
BPA// Berlin program for artists  
Catinca Tabacaru Gallery  
(New York, Harare, Bucharest)  
Efremidis (Berlin, Seoul)  
Readytex Art Gallery (Paramaribo)

Printing  
Printing house KOPA, Lithuania

Detailing the creation of a three and a half metre tall bronze sculpture of Surinamese politician Johan Adolf Pengel by Surinamese visual artist Stuart Robles de Medina, the photo album at the centre of this book chronicles its construction from the artist's studio and a provisional foundry in October 1972 to its public unveiling on 5 June 1974 in Independence Square, Paramaribo, Suriname, where the statue stands to this day. As the first and last bronze monument to be produced entirely in Suriname, these predominantly black and white photographs show the process of building an infrastructure from the ground up for large-scale bronze casting done in Suriname with the help of the Reli company.

As the grandson of the artist, this photo album was instrumental in my early artistic development and eventual pursuit of art as a profession. It provided insight into the possibilities and intricacies of artmaking as a child growing up in Suriname in the nineties. The scale and technical innovations of the work, fueled by the determination, stamina, and political engagement of my grandparents, inspired me, and continues to inspire me to this day.

Fifty years after the unveiling of the statue of Pengel, I wish to preserve this hitherto private family photo album, with supporting archival materials, as this facsimile, identical in format to its source, and offer it as a historical document of Stuart Robles de Medina's life's work as an artist and educator.

"Listen, this is not part of the MO-course [middle school teacher training course], but I want to pass on this knowledge," he recalled telling his students, during a filmed interview in 2005, a year before his death. It is a brief yet telling moment, in which he states explicitly his intentions toward the end of his life, of passing on these methods and ideas. The idea of conserving this photo album, which laid in his lap as he spoke in the video, then, is implicit here. Considering the generosity of his recorded retelling and willingness to participate in the filmed interview, supporting Gerard Lau in his plan to make a documentary (which never materialized), the conservation of his artistic legacy indeed might have been on his mind.

Perhaps it can be inferred from my offering of an English translation, the intended audience here is not limited to Suriname. My hope is that this information spreads also within the international contemporary art community for whom the work of Stuart Robles de Medina, and this story, may be even more novel.

Lau's unpublished filmed interview with my grandfather from 2005, and a conversation I recorded with my grandmother, Barbara Robles de Medina-Nobrega, and my father, Amedeo Robles de Medina, in July 2023, form the basis for the texts included in this document. I have transcribed and edited these first-hand accounts concerning the development of the sculpture with the primary intention of balancing clarity with fidelity to what was originally recorded. These accounts are essential to understanding the photographic material and paint a vivid image of the socio-political complexities surrounding the sculpture's creation. The myriad meanings of this family story have shifted in personal significance over time, but the through-line is something elemental to the story of Surinamese democracy, and the union of art and political activism.

Xavier Robles de Medina,  
November 2023

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[3]



[4]



[60]



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[64]



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[34]





[182]



[183]



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## Standbeeld Pengel onthuld

Het in opdracht van de regering-Sidney vervaardigde standbeeld van wijlen J.A. Pengel, door de beeldhouwer Stuart Robles de Medina is woensdagmiddag in aanwezigheid van duizenden onthuld door mevrouw de weduwe L. Pengel-Augustuszon.

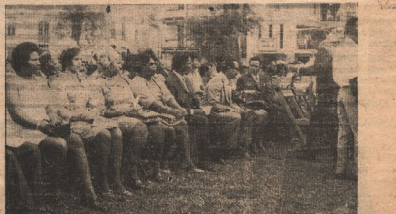
Het beeld is 3 1/2 meter hoog, en staat op een sokkel van ruim 2 meter, op het Oranjesplein "bij" het ministerie van Financiën, waarvan de heer Pengel ook, getuige zij de lediging heeft gehad.

Hoewel de onthullingsplechtigheid om half vijf 's middags zou beginnen verschoofden al rond twee uur 's middags, honderden mensen zich op het Oranjesplein en op de terrassen van omliggende gebouwen zich van een plaats, die hen een goed uitzicht bood, op het dentrum waar alles zich zou afspelen.

De verschillende sprekers — gouverneur Dr. J. Ferrier, statenvoorzitter van Emilia Wijntuin, J. Lemmer (Pa op de verdiensten van Pengel, die Lem) en premier H. Arron — wezen de eerste voorzitter v.d. Meederbond, statenvoorzitter en premier van 1963 tot en met 1969 geweest. Staten voorzitter Wijntuin heette vooral aan de woorden van Pengel: „al houden wij niet van elkaar, laten wij elkaar omhelzen“ veel waarde. Volgens de parlementarier moet deze uitspraak voor ons een richtsnoer zijn om gezamenlijk aan de ontwikkeling van Suriname te werken.

Pa Lem accentueerde de integraalpolitiek van Pengel, terwijl premier Arron aandrong op het in ere houden door het volk van haar grote zonen. De premier stelde Stuart Robles de Medina, schapper van het beeld, voor aan de bij de plechtigheid aanwezigen en liet zich lovend uit over het werk van de kunstenaar.

De onthulling van de weduwe van de man, werd gevolgd door een groot applaus van de Van de honderde bloemstelen die d'beeld werden gele van mevrouw, de Augustuszon, gelidchter van Jopie vernoer, de politiek NPK, de VNP, gelidder Jaggernath Lachman van de NPS.



Tijdens de onthullingsplechtigheid gisterenmiddag op het Oranjesplein zaten op de voorste rij (v.l.n.r.) mevrouw M. Augustuszon-Wolff, de weduwe L. Pengel-Augustuszon, mej. J. Pengel, mej. Y. Pengel, de heren Herkult, lid der Staten van Suriname, premier H. Arron, mev. Arron-Leeuwijn (slechts gedeeltelijk zichtbaar) en vice-premier O. van Genderen.

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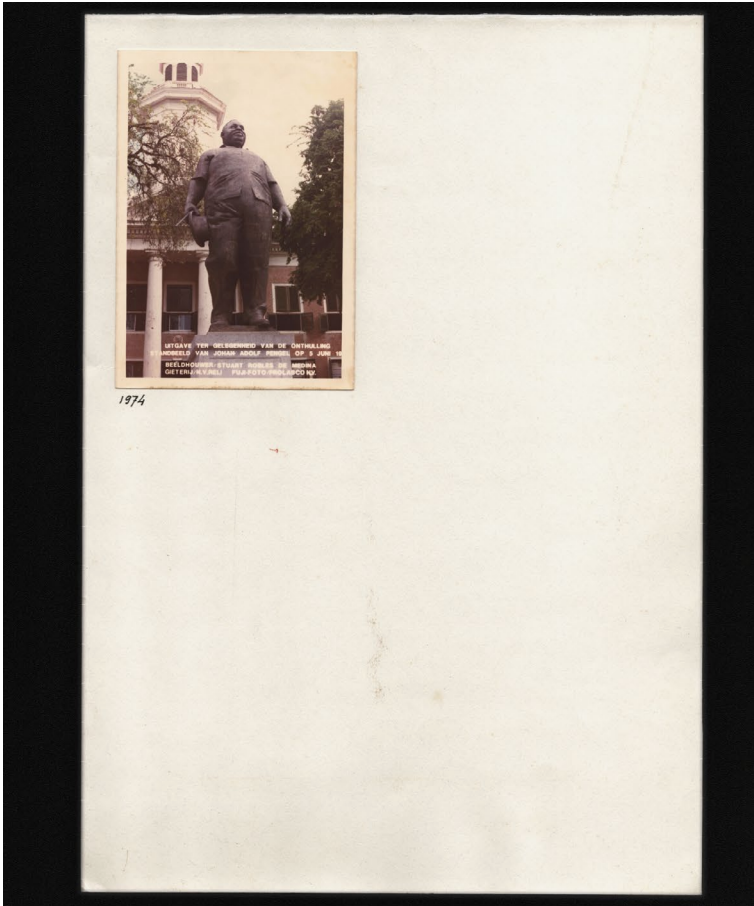
De onthulling van het beeld door de weduwe van de overleden staatsman, werd gevolgd door een hartelijk applaus van de duizenden. Van de honderden kransen en bloemstelen die daarna bij het beeld werden gelegd, waren er van mevrouw, de wed. Pengel-Augustuszon, gelegd door een dochter van Jopie Pengel, de gouverneur, de politieke partijen de NPK, de VNP, gelegd door haar lid der Jaggernath Lachman en afdeelen van de NPS.



Dit is het door Stuart Robles de Medina vervaardigde beeld van J.A. Pengel







Nederlands/Dutch

# Pengel

Stuart Robles de Medina

Part I

Part II

Part III

## Introduction

Johan Adolf Pengel (1916-1978) was Prime Minister of Suriname from 1963 to 1969. At this time, political groups were largely organised along racial lines. One of Pengel's greatest political achievements as chairman of the National Party of Suriname (NPS) was to work with Jopie van den Ende (1916-2001) to form a coalition with the United Hindostani Party (UHP), renamed the Progressive Reform Party in 1975).

Stuart Robles de Medina (1958-2008) was a Surinamese artist and educator. In the sixties and seventies, he was a prolific sculptor of public monuments. An early example is the State Monument (State Monument) from 1969, which introduced him to the process of large-scale bronze production in the Netherlands; an experience that would inform his decision to develop the entire work for Pengel in Suriname.

Barbara Robles de Medina-Nobrega (1958) is a singer and retired bank administrator. In 1986, she married Stuart Robles de Medina, with whom she had six children. She is one of the first young teachers in Suriname, and sang the first Surinamese flag, which was raised in Independence Square on the day of Suriname's Independence. She was closely involved in organising the production of Pengel's statue. She currently lives in Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

Amedeo Robles de Medina (1961) is a dentist and the son of Stuart Robles de Medina and Barbara Robles de Medina-Nobrega. As a child, he was closely involved in every phase of the process of the sculpture of Pengel. He currently lives in Paramaribo, Suriname, where he runs his own dental practice.

Xavier Robles de Medina (1990) is an artist based in Berlin, Germany. He is the grandson of Stuart and Barbara, and the son of Amedeo Robles de Medina. He collects and organizes images and texts from digital and physical sources, using them to form works, which merge poetry and politics. He is currently participating in the BPA// Berlin program for artists.

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An artist's biography and a broader political narrative around the crucial five-year period before independence from the Netherlands by turns, these materials tell the story of Suriname's uniquely and inherently multicultural landscape on the cusp of a new era of political self-determination, a century after the abolition of slavery in 1873. As the grandson of the artist, this photo album was instrumental in my early artistic development and eventual pursuit of art as a profession. It provided insight into the possibilities and intricacies of artmaking as a child growing up in Suriname in the nineties. The scale and technical innovations of the work, fuelled by the determination, stamina, and political engagement of my grandparents, inspired me, and continues to inspire me to this day.

The significance of the statue of Pengel is conveyed partly through how its scale visibly undermined Queen Wilhelmina's statue, which shared Independence Square with it for a year and four months. Subsequently, my grandfather physically removed the statue of Queen Wilhelmina, which was replaced with a flagpole and an extremely large Surinamese flag seen by my grandmother specifically for the Independence Day ceremony on 25 November 1975. This later history extended the objectives of the work far beyond its initial bronze casting.

Fifty years after the unveiling of the statue of Pengel, I wish to preserve this hitherto private family photo album, with supporting archival materials, as this facsimile, identical in format to its source, and offer it as a historical document of Stuart Robles de Medina's life's work as an artist and educator.

"Listen, this is not part of the MO-course [middle-school teacher training course], but I want to pass on this knowledge," he recalled telling his students, during a filmed interview in 2005, a year before his death. It is a brief yet telling moment, in which he states explicitly his intentions toward the end of his life, of passing on these methods and ideas. The idea of conserving this photo album, which laid in his lap as he spoke in the video, then, is implicit here. Considering the generosity of his recorded retelling and willingness to participate in the filmed interview, supporting Gerard Lau in his plan to make a documentary (which never materialized), the conservation of his artistic legacy indeed might have been on his mind.

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Xavier Robles de Medina,  
November 2023

Pengel

STUART ROBLES DE MEDINA

## Part I

11 March 2005, Paramaribo. Stuart Robles de Medina interviewed by Gerard Lau. The text has been transcribed, edited, and reformatted from the original video recording.

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## Part II

6 July 2023, Eindhoven. Barbara Robles de Medina-Nobrega, Amedeo Robles de Medina, and Xavier Robles de Medina in conversation. The text has been transcribed and edited from the original audio recording.

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## Part III

Stuart Robles de Medina, Barbara Robles de Medina-Nobrega, Amedeo Robles de Medina, and Xavier Robles de Medina comment on the images in the photo album. Stuart Robles de Medina's commentary is based on the 2005 video recording in Part I. The commentary by Barbara Robles de Medina-Nobrega, Amedeo Robles de Medina, and Xavier Robles de Medina is taken from the 2023 audio recording in Part II.

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The estate of Stuart Robles de Medina

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### Fonts in Use

Antique Olive Black  
Garamond Frutiger Medium  
Monument Grotesk Mono

### Made with the support of

BPA// Berlin program for artists  
Caroline Taberner Gallery  
(New York, Havana, Bucharest)  
Firefield (Berlin, Seoul)  
Readytix Art Gallery (Paramaribo)

### Printing

Printing House KOPA, Lithuania

### ISBN

978-3-00-077626-3

### Edition

200

### Publishing House

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# Part I

11 March 2005, Paramaribo. Stuart Robles de Medina interviewed by Gerard Lau. The text has been transcribed, edited, and reformatted from the original video recording.

I am Stuart Robles de Medina, former teacher of handicraft and drawing, and course leader of the MO-course in handicraft and drawing. Also, an artist that means sculptor and painter and draughtsman. I did my studies in Tilburg, MO-course in drawing in Tilburg and later completed in 'The Hague'. I did the MO-course in handicraft in Amersfoort five years later in 1958, through 1960. In 1960, I returned to Suriname to work at the teacher training school.

I got my first commission after my MO-course in drawing and handicraft only twelve years after graduating. That was in 1962, commissioned by Mr. Nagel, the architect who built the Central Bank at the Waterkant. He commissioned me then to design the three doors for the bank. I did that, so I also made and designed them myself. That was my first assignment in Suriname. From then on, I got other commissions, like the one from Bruynzeel, and later from Lou Lichveld (Albert Helman). I went a commission, and then it continued naturally. I later won many prizes in competitions such as stamp competitions, and the first prize of the Aloosa competition (1956), and that's how I got into it, and I started painting portraits.

I got to know Pengel only in 1968. He invited me there once because I was commissioned to make a gift, a gift from Suriname to the World Health Organisation in Washington (1965). It was a brand-new building that was being constructed, and each country then gave a gift. I was commissioned then to make a sculpture in Surinamese wood as a gift to the organisation. I received compliments from all sides—unfortunately as an artist then, I never documented things, or kept things, but I received many compliments.

I got an invitation from Pengel one time to come and meet him at Surinamestraat, in his spare time in the evening, when he had his get-together with Mr. Kanhai, his publicist, and Mr. Lemmer. I also saw very different men, like Kruisland as a very young man, and Arnon also was there. There he also had those two lions. Pengel had received two lions as a gift. I don't remember from whom. People close to him, after office hours, would sit there in the evening with him and chat, of course also about politics and such. Twice I went there. Then I got to know the man in a different capacity as a human being, as an ordinary man. He sat there just in his underwear. And if at any point he crossed himself (Surinamese dish with root vegetables), he would have himself delivered, and eat himself. It was very enjoyable.

And I later got another commission from a friend of mine, Walter Lim A Po, to paint a portrait of Pengel. But that couldn't happen at my house, because he wouldn't come to my place. I would bring my things to his office at General Affairs and so while he was working I had to paint him. That was a very stressful assignment for me, because I had to sit there while he had discussions with his ministers. One by one they came, while he gave orders to his secretaries. But he was very pleasant. In two sessions I painted Pengel then.

At another stage, he appointed me to a committee for the national tree and national flower of Suriname. The chairman of which was Engr. Adhin. And Joyce Gada was also on the committee, and a few others. I was also part of that. That's how I got to know Pengel. I also did other things before that, with the elections in '69, the NPS then asked me to screen (silkscreen print) undershirts, as campaign materials. I did that in my then new studio (on Rodeskruisland), with the help of a couple of guys. I printed those 10,000 undershirts for the NPS. Pengel also came over once to have a look then.

Later, we got a commission from him to make Martin Luther King. He had just died and a statue was to be made. I was at such an advanced stage. I had completed Martin Luther King in clay form, and then that first big strike broke out in Suriname. I put it aside at the time as I was active in a group then, against the group that was against the Pengel administration. The commission then fell through, but that sculpture was indeed finished in clay. Unfortunately, I don't have any photos of it. I had gotten photo material from America at the time, even a long play (LP) with those important speeches. So, while I was working, I heard the voice of Martin Luther King in my studio, and it was wonderfully inspiring. But anyway, so the sculpture did not go ahead, because I had neglected to submit my budget, what the sculpture would cost, plus an artistic valuation, and so on. I was focused on making that sculpture, not on what I would earn. The Pengel administration fell, and as a result the sculpture did not go ahead.

After Pengel's death, I was commissioned to paint a portrait of him, to hang in the hall of General Affairs, where all his other predecessors also hung. Shortly thereafter, I was visited by Mr. Kruisland and Wim van Eer. They came to ask if I would like to make a design for Pengel's statue. A committee had been appointed in the NPS for a John Adolf Pengel statue. They asked me: "Is it possible for the work to be made here in Suriname?" I said: "Yes, I can do it," and they asked: "Are you sure?" I said: "Yes, I can do it." He said: "Because the committee is a bit divided." A part wanted to have it made abroad, and another part, including Wim and Kruisland, were in favour of having it made in Suriname from A to Z. That's when I accepted the challenge.

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## Part I

Once the clay sculpture was finished, I started working with my students to mould it in parts, in sections. So, in parts we built that thing up, and fired it out and cast it in parts again. Those parts then ended up back in my studio, and there the parts were put back together again, into what it is now. But day and night, we worked, I can tell you.

Pengel was almost finished in bronze. Suddenly, the neighbourhood heard a snore. Very clearly. And I heard it in the morning too and I woke up my wife, and I said: "Do you hear that, do you hear that?" And she said: "I hear it too." And it was silent. When the sun came up it was gone. And again, and again, every night, and then one of those students of mine said: "It's Pengel who's snoring." Just for eggs. And that gained the whole thing. And then Slagveer heard it. He immediately came over, so I told him what was going on. I said: "But it could also be Pengel's lions. Because when a lion snores at night, you can hear it from very far away. Just like when you hear those howler monkeys, those howler monkeys are kilometres away, and still you can hear them." Slagveer went on to publish it in his paper, "Pengel is snoring!" just before the election. So I went to school later, and some of those guys came up to me: "Man, you're a terrible publicist! It's a publicity stunt. Pengel is snoring." That was just a joke in the interim. Slagveer got it rolling.



It went in phases. So initially there were Van Eer and Kruisland, who were supporters of me making it. And had faith in me and in my ability. Sedney cooperated, which I can't say about other ministers at the time, who denied me a lot of things. With the support of my wife, we got by with that little amount of money. I got that year, she also had the conviction that I could make it, she had that confidence in me. And I haven't my, my son (Amedeo), he was great.

He helped with everything. Because of the help, from a twelve-year-old boy, it was such a motivation for me, to convince him, too, that I could do it. He believed in me that I could do it, so an incredibly great bond developed, that one year, between him and me. He was involved in all the stages. So, in the first phase, he helped with cleaning the clay, collecting the clay. From Suhosa, from the clay factory Suhosa, we got coarse clay and cleaned it for modelling. He helped with welding the framework, hanging crossbars against the framework. I did the modelling work, of course, but other than that he did everything.

And in phase two he was also involved. That was covering the clay sculpture in plaster, to make those plaster moulds, and also involved there were my former pupils: Heymans, Eric Lie, who still teaches karate (taekwondo teacher, died in 2022), Lie A Njock, a pupil of mine, and Doelwijf. Doelwijf was a karate teacher and student of mine.

The third phase, preparing the plaster moulds, cleaning those plaster moulds, and laying the wax plates. That is also where that same group—no Heymans, Lie, and Lie A Njock, and Doelwijf—and my father also came to help, and my son. My father came to clean, so that everything looked orderly, because the work was day and night, and he also found it exciting, to watch that thing grow. In the third phase, those plaster moulds had to be brought together, with those wax plates in them, with the spurs, and the vents. When you pour bronze through the spurs, air accumulates, and that air has to be released through the vents.

Then you get phase four, building up the foundry, which coincided with phase three, so while they were busy executing phase three in my studio, I was also building the foundry, at Reli, so making the kiln, and those hoists, and so on. That was phase four, also led by Roel Lim A Po.

And then phase five. When we were going to begin casting, I enlisted those casters from Beekhuizen. The minister of public works allowed me to work with those guys, who also had some casting experience, but they had never cast a sculpture before. So this was completely new to them too. At Beekhuizen, they cast screws, nut bolts, in bronze or in lead. Their foreman was Jeffrey. There was Kogeldams, a welder, Lie—no, no, Lie was a fitter, who fired up the bronze, to the right temperature. There was also a certain Stokkel present, but I can't remember exactly what he did, and a Wiebers, and a certain Mees, who also used to join.

We first cast a test to get those guys used to it, how hot the bronze had to be, and the fluidity. It had to be cast in one stream. So pouring from the crucible had to be done in one movement, until the mould is full because otherwise you get air inside, and you get corrosion, of the bronze as well, and then those parts come off, of course. Then you have to start all over again. And so I then moulded several busts that I had at home beforehand as tests. The first two failed. The third one started getting better and the fourth one was about ninety-five per cent good. Only then did I switch to the parts for Pengel.

I learnt this method when I had to make the sculpture in Spanhoek (State Monument, 1966). That was also made and cast in the Netherlands. I worked in the foundry for four months then, also day and night, and learnt the whole technique then. I then applied that technique to Pengel, and I had wanted to apply it to Martin Luther King, and I also cast myself later, so I know that technique well. But in the first phase I made small mistakes, makes sense. When I worked in the foundry, I also learnt how to correct mistakes. So if there was a hole, an air bubble, in an area of a casting like that, you have to be able to fill the hole, exactly as it was. And all these little things, I learnt then.

The first part we cast... (read) the back, and because the sand in the tub, where the mould poured in, was not stamped well enough against that plaster mould, when we cast that liquid bronze, the mould started to expand, making it too thick at the bottom of the back part, and way too heavy. So that part

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## Pengel

STUART ROBLES DE MEDINA

Van Eer was my headmaster, from the teacher training school. And Kruisland was his friend. In that context, I got to know him a few times and they knew what I was capable of, and they supported me, by convincing the other part of the status committee that I could do it. And especially because I said I could do it here, in Suriname. That was what was so exciting about it, to prove that we could also do it ourselves, and not necessarily go abroad every time.



I made a design, and then they came with the prime minister, Jules Sedney, to take a look at the design. All three of them were excited about the proposal. Then I was already verbally commissioned to make that sculpture. Sedney wanted to know how big it would be, then I said: "The sculpture should be at least three and a half metres tall. About as tall as princess Wilhelmina, if it is to stand out in that space." At first Sedney didn't want that, he wanted it a bit smaller, then I referred him to Ojeda (also known as The Discoverer) by Erwin de Vries. Nobody knows that sculpture, nobody sees that sculpture either, it's standing there in New Amsterdam, looking at the mouth of the Suriname River. I said: "Try to sail past on that big plain there, and you look at New Amsterdam, you will never be able to see that statue by Erwin de Vries, because that statue is only two metres twenty tall. And it's standing on a very low pedestal." I said: "You can never see that in a space like that. And Orange Square (Independence Square), if you want to see the sculpture from the other side of the square, then that thing has to have a volume." Then he went sailing one time—he was my neighbour—and later when he returned, he said: "Stuart you're right, go ahead." He gave me totally free rein. I made my sculpture three and a half metres.

When it was fixed in clay, Arnon came by, with that old gentleman De la Fuente, who was really an NPS man, and Mr. Lemmer, Pa Lem, they spent some time looking at the statue. I didn't know Pa Lem. I had met him only once by Pengel's guava tree, but otherwise I'd never spoken to him. Then he said: "Stuart, I must pay you my compliments." That was the first time I got a compliment, other people just looked, and they never said anything. "I was in favour of it being made in Italy," Lemmer said to me, "but I have to apologise." He thought it was a beautiful sculpture, but at that point it was still in clay.

Afterwards, I came to an understanding with those guys of mine, from the MO-course: "Listen, this is not part of the MO-course, but I want to pass on this knowledge, are you willing to participate?" And all four boys ended up participating—you'll soon see them here in my album—in moulding the sculpture, and going through that whole process, for a year. That was the agreement with Sedney: one year, exactly one year.

When I was commissioned for the sculpture, I got at least eighty photographs, from the RVDS, Government Information Service. I posted those in my studio, so everywhere I turned I saw Pengel, from all angles. On the basis of all those photos, plus my personal experience, I made a composition, how I would like Pengel to be.

I saw him not only as a human being, but also as a leader of the people. During that period, the man was so popular that he had admirers in every other party. One time, I was at General Affairs visiting the director, Peter van der Geld, and I looked out the window and it was about half past one, and nobody was going home. I looked at all the surrounding ministries, and people were standing at the window waiting for Pengel himself to leave his office and get in his car and go home. Only then did the windows close, and only then did everyone go home. That fascinated me so much that I said: "No, this man is truly the leader of the people."

That's what I wanted to convey in Pengel's sculpture later on. So you didn't merely see the likeness of the man, and the body, but that leadership had to come out. A simple man, no suit and no tie, just a man of the people. Plus, the strength that radiated from the man. I very lightly turned the man's head towards the palace, just for a moment. So he is not stupidly looking straight ahead. He also had the stature to complement his form, and I did not portray him as a fighter, he is just walking. He is walking forward, into the future. Those are the things I wanted to convey.

It's the first time such a statue was cast in Suriname. No bronze statue has ever been cast in Suriname before. And certainly not in this size. So everything in one go. The courage I had, was I was forty-two years old, I didn't get tired. For a year I never got tired. Day and night I worked with my son, in my studio, so when I slept, as soon as I woke up, I would go downstairs, and immediately resume working on that thing. It didn't let go of me for a year.

As soon as I got some money from Sedney, to buy materials, then I started the framework. I went to my friend Walter Lim A Po, I said: "Can you help me persuade your brother, so I get a space somewhere there in his factory to build a foundry?" His brother, Roel, was working at Zanderij to open the rampway. We went to meet him there and he was immediately excited. He said: "Stuart, one hundred per cent, I'll work with you."

We later had the discussions in the back. During the meeting I told him: "I need a kiln that should look like that, I need a furnace, I need a machine to turn the bronze into the bronze, into the bronze." I explained to him exactly how it had to be set up, and then he put his men to work. I later ordered from him the bronze from the Netherlands, and some coal, and plaster, and other materials. For the most part, we used Surinamese wood for firing, charcoal, and to melt the bronze—because the bronze had to reach a very high temperature—I ordered coal from the Netherlands.

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then had to be remade, but that could not be done immediately. So then we first made all the parts: the footplate, the shoes, with the lower leg, and later the upper part, and after that the rest. We first cast all those and welded them together, and then only the back part remained open, a big hole.

Because I had already learnt this, in the Netherlands, how to repair a failed part, I then welded an other framework in the back, and covered it in clay, and formed it again, in exactly the same back, aligned with the bronze pieces. I then formed that part again, and I finished. We fitted that part into the back again, and then the sculpture was finished. After that it was just the finishing touches, the clipping of all those burr pieces. Was a hell of a job, but very exciting.

At a certain point when the sculpture was finished, Arnon and a few other guys—and later Sedney joined them—invited the four Grammams (parliamentary member) to my house to see it. Grammam Abol-koni, Grammam Foster, Grammam Gazon Matodja, and a fourth, his name I don't remember, but Foster was a Christian, those others were non-Christians. They came and we were not allowed to film, and we were not allowed to take pictures. They came with their Captain and my wife was not allowed to serve them, so no serving soda or a beer, no, no. The Captain had to get it himself from our fridge and pour it, and it was very fascinating to see, those strict rules they followed. Then they went to my studio to see Pengel, and Foster was the only one who had brought his wife, the others had left their wives at home. And that woman came right back out of my studio screaming, and my wife had to hold her. She was so scared, she was shaking, because she thought that sculpture was so great, so impactful, that she couldn't stay in the studio. They also prayed then. They took a Dyogo (a one litre beer bottle) from me, from the fridge, and while one of them slowly poured it over the feet of Pengel, they all stood and prayed. That was very beautiful. Arnon had invited them to look at the statue. That was before the unveiling.

I designed the pedestal myself. A pedestal that suited the man, it had to be a unified whole, I didn't want someone else to come in and build a pedestal and then the statue would be placed on top. So I decided the height myself, the length, the width, and I made the blueprints, I then went to the BEM, and the BEM used my blueprints to make the formwork and cast the slabs. They placed it right there, where it is now.

Later, I came with Reli, from Lim A Po, we had to hoist that sculpture out of my studio with a crane, because the sculpture was so big that it couldn't fit through my door. A crane truck had to come and break open my roof to lift that thing. That's how it was brought there, and with that crane we then placed that sculpture on the pedestal.

Then came the unveiling. That was very exciting for me. The square was completely full. Both behind the Finance Ministry and on the square, there were hundreds of people, there was a lot, I think all of Paramaribo was standing there. And I am not that extroverted, I was very impressed and bashful, that so many people came to see my statue. It was beautiful. I received a sneaky compliment then from those guys from NOS, that they liked the statue. And Venetiaan was the first to come to me, to congratulate me. And later Wim's wife, Wim van Eer. Then together with Roel Lim A Po from the foundation, I went to Torarua for a drink. And that's how the day went. And so later, from all directions—all that time when I'm sitting at 't Vat and people come by, who still recognise me—people still come to compliment me on the statue.



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# Part II

6 July 2023, Eindhoven. **B** Barbara Robles de Medina Nobrega, **A** Amedeo Robles de Medina, and **X** Xavier Robles de Medina in conversation. The text has been transcribed and edited from the original audio recording.

**X** To start with, I actually want to understand a bit better what it was like in Suriname, during the Pengel administration. What was the atmosphere like and what exactly was your relationship with Pengel?

**B** So obviously I can only give you my own experiences, my own impressions; that may not be the average opinion of the average Surinamese, but [it was] as I, we, experienced it. Anyway, that whole period, the fifties, sixties, was terribly exciting. Because it was the period in which Surinamese became aware of their individuality, their Surinameseness, and the possibility of breaking away from the colonial ruler, which was essentially a thorn in the side of all of us. And that movement, we were in the middle of that, and Pengel was a very, very important figure in that.

So he made us, especially the Surinamese of colour, he made us realise that we had our own identity. Grandpa and I were very much admirers of Pengel, of Johan Adolf Pengel. And grandpa's brother was Pengel's translator, he was Pengel's Spanish translator. So everywhere Pengel went, if he needed a Spanish interpreter, Ro went with him. So Ro was very closely involved with Pengel. So naturally that connection with Pengel was also a bit closer. We have, of course, your grandfather, that is, painted Pengel a couple of times, twice, portraits of him. One of the portraits disappeared without a trace, nobody knows where it is, and the other portrait, I think, was burnt. During the fire of General Affairs. I thought he was a very nice, very quiet, sweet man. That's my impression of Pengel.

**X** Do you have any specific memories of him?

**B** Yes, very superficial ones, really. He lived in Zorg en Hoop, and we visited him once, but it was a very short visit. He had a very beautiful tree, I believe it was an almond tree, under which they sat, talking and drinking, and discussing politics, and so we visited him there once. But I didn't know him much more personally than that. But I did admire him.

**X** In 1969, the NPS lost the election and Pengel's time as prime minister comes to an end. What was actually the cause, or what was the context around that?

**B** What I know about it is that his leadership was made difficult, and actually hijacked by Dutch interference during those years. There were agents from the Dutch government coming to Suriname, disguised as teachers, and they stirred things up. So you had the AMS, general secondary school, and the teacher training school; those were the two secondary schools at the time. And many Dutch teachers got jobs at the AMS, but a handful also at the teacher training school.

A tremendous feud developed between the Dutch teachers and the Surinamese, because, first of all, those Dutch teachers got better pay. The Surinamese did the same work, but they were not remunerated as well. And, of course, there was also that political aspect. And certain teachers, not all of them, but certain ones, had come to instigate things, to sow seeds among the population. And then the Surinamese teachers formed the teachers' union [BvU], and those Dutch teachers were in the VELMEK. And those two associations, they clashed.

And that was being fought all the way to the courthouse. And one time when one of those trials was about to take place—I was one of the first to arrive at the courthouse, and I was at the very front against the glass door. Gradually more people came, it got more and more crowded, and the pressure from the back against the door was so great that I was pushed through the door. The door just exploded, shattered, and I was covered in shards.

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## Part II

there in the neighborhood with all the ethnic groups mixed together. We didn't concern ourselves with political things, but occasionally there was news of a fire. We did experience those big fires as teenagers, then we would jump on our bikes and go quickly to look.

**X** And those fires were politically related?

**A** So we didn't know that then, all of a sudden there was a big fire and it was sensational for us.

**B** And we'd go by car to look, on Watermolenstraat.

**X** It must have been around that time, in '71, that the NPS decided to have a statue of Pengel made by Grandpa. How did that actually start?

**B** Yes, because he started the sculpture in '72, so the run-up to the commission took a while, but the NPS couldn't get it done, because they wanted him to be partially funded by the government. Then Sedney pushed for it, at some point.

**A** And Sedney was the prime minister at the time.

**B** But he had to get permission from the minister of education, because he couldn't make that sculpture and also teach classes, and be a teacher. So he had to get time off, to do a project like that. He had to go to the minister of education, and the minister of education at the time was, what's his name? A Hindostani guy, the brother of August Frijmersun's wife.

**A** Mitzasing.

**B** Mitzasing. He went to the minister to apply for extraordinary leave from duty. Extraordinary leave, that means, paid leave. Then Mitzasing said to him: "What do you need that for, the holiday is coming up, can't you do that thing during the summer break?" The summer break is six weeks. The very idea is ridiculous. You can't. You can't make a sculpture like that in six weeks. So then they turned it down.

Then we had to deliberate together. He said: "It's up to you, what you decide, I'm sticking by that, but I can't make that statue in six weeks." I said: "Of course you can't make that statue in six weeks." He said: "If I do want to make it, and I want exemption from service, it's without pay." I said: "Well, Stuart, listen, if you don't grab this chance now, to show what you can do, to show your ability and your, and your, and the uniqueness of your ability, you're never going to get the chance again. This is your chance. We'll see what we're going to do, we'll see."

That's how he accepted the commission anyway, without payment. What they did do, they gave an advance to start, because he had given them a whole quote. From that, we could live then as frugally as possible, because I mean, with five children, you have to eat every day, you need things.

And so after that, he submitted his very elaborate plan, and based on that, he then got an advance of 45,000 guilders. So making the sculpture, and our living expenses, had to come from that. So you can imagine that I had to make the greatest possible effort to keep my head above water, to spend as little of that money as possible, because he needed it to make that statue.

Which led me to lie from Eerste Rijweg Store. I had agreed with them to take as much as possible on account. I explained to him how things were. I said: "When this is all over and my husband gets his full payment, I'll come and settle everything with you again." And he had accepted that. So On Tjai would write it down. Because otherwise we could not have lived. We could not have survived.

**A** So, I don't know about that argument, but I do know that every now and then we had to go shopping, and then it was poured down in a little book, by On Tjai. Then he would put marks.

**B** We both had a book. I made that arrangement then with that Chinese guy. I'm not at all businesslike in nature. I mean, I'm not at all... um, money making stuff, that doesn't suit me. But I still managed to do that.

**X** Maybe he also saw the importance of the project. Can you remember when he made that first sculpture in wax? Because that's the original concept, I suppose.

**A** I do know that there was a small sculpture in black wax. What I remember as a child is that there was a sculpture of Martin Luther King in the studio. We saw that there because he was first working on the statue of Martin Luther King, who had just been shot. And I don't know why that sculpture was there, but I think he was commissioned to make that. There were a lot of pictures of Martin Luther King, and at a certain point there were pictures of Pengel.

**B** That design in wax he showed, you know, that was approved to be carried out by those, by NPS front men, who had commissioned it to the first place.

**A** Yes, so they together with Kross [Kruisland] and with Sedney, committed to getting Pengel done, to making it. Even though Sedney was from a different party. But he was the prime minister at the time. And even though Dad drew those caricatures of Sedney, because that was prior to this. I do re-

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Once I was in the hall, people came up to me from all sides, everybody around me was taking splinters out of my face, out of my neck, everywhere. I don't know how I survived that. But those were very exciting, thrilling times.

**A** What I can remember is the 1969 strike, because that's when the AMS students came to SRS [Foundation Radio Broadcasting Suriname], which was across the street from where we lived. And my brother and I then climbed onto the roof to watch the storming of SRS from above, and that was very exciting, we were eight years old then.

**B** That procession then went down Herman Snoistraat, past my brother-in-law's house, Ro, who was director of the teacher training school, and so he was also in the teachers' union. They pelted him with stones, and then they came by our house. I was terrified, I thought, my God, they better not start smashing things here, because we don't have the money to have everything rebuilt. But anyway, they continued on. And chanting, they were shouting things. They had slogans. I don't remember exactly what, but slogans were shouted, as they were on their way to SRS.

**X** And shortly after that, Pengel also died.

**A** He was admitted to AZ [Academic Hospital Paramaribo], and after that he died. Maybe from disappointment and betrayal.

**X** And tremendous stress, I can imagine.

**B** What I do know—but you don't have to include that in this thing—the night he died, I didn't even know he had already passed, I had a dream. Grandpa and Grandma were in Holland, they weren't in Suriname, and Stuart was in Washington with Josef Klas [Surinamese sculptor and artist, 1923-1998], on some kind of stipend, that they were given the opportunity to take courses there, or I don't know what. It was very short, but it was in the month of June [Pengel died on 6 June 1978].

I dreamt that Joseph took my hand. A very soft hand. And it slid down my hand so gently. So very gently. And when I woke up, I thought, how strange. I heard later that day that he had passed away. Then I thought, did that man come to greet me, but I'm not really close with him, why did he come to greet me like that? I can never forget that, frankly.

**X** But what did people think of Pengel after his death.

**B** Look, the NPS anyway, his whole party, of course was completely devastated, and sad. Everybody felt bad that that man had to die at such a young age. And he could have done a lot more for the country. He and Lachmon were the leaders of those two parties, NPS and VNP, but they got along very well. And they were engaged in unification, and bringing the different demographics closer together, and trying to form unity. They did try to do that. Alas, not everyone was so enamored with that, probably.

**X** Other than that, how was your life and experience in Suriname in the early seventies, just everyday life as a family?

**B** Life was more lonely. It was a quiet life, basically, except in politics; in politics it was constant commotion. Because there were the voices, and those indeed were coming from the NPS, when Pengel was still alive, but to become independent. So there were the people who were committed to that, and the people who were absolutely against that, and who were afraid of independence. Because they were made to be afraid also by the groups of the Javanese and the Hindostani party, that once the independence would become fact, that the Black Surinamese would come to dominate then. That fear was terribly strong, especially among the Javanese. Soemita frightened those people terribly. Soemahardjo too.

**A** And they left in droves.

**B** In droves! Left for Holland then.

**X** That was around '70 or so?

**B** No.

**A** Just before '75.

**B** Independence was in November, so that whole year of '76 people left.

**A** After the announcement of the date, and after the consequences for their rationality became apparent, they left immediately.

**X** But that was, in fact, after the unveiling of the statue.

**B** Yes, the statue had already been unveiled in '74.

**X** And that was before the big exodus, basically, to the Netherlands.

**B** Yes, the big exodus was really throughout '76.

**A** What I can remember as a young teenager back then, we actually had a pretty pleasant childhood

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## Part II

**B** I got the fabric in the afternoon, at about six o'clock. Whole rage. And it had to have a star on it. That yellow star had to be there. All those strips had to be sewn together. I worked all night behind that sewing machine. All night. Until early in the morning.

**A** In fact, they had raised a flag, at the André Kamperveen stadium [known as the Suriname Stadium since its opening in 1953, name changed in 1988].

**B** They had that ready. They had already thought of that. But the one for the square they hadn't planned. Such a tiny flag, like the ones you hang on a house, that's what they would have put there, your father said: "No, that's really not an option, that can't be done, that's ridiculous. You have to come up with something else for that." So that's how I spent the night before Independence, behind my sewing machine. No one knows that. I asked once, what happened to that flag, does that flag still exist? They said: "No." Probably due to weather and wind. I mean, a flag like that wears out after a few years anyway. So yes. Nan.

**X** And so that's the end of the story, or of this chapter. Finally, what's your impression of the sculpture, or how it contributed to Grandpa's artistic legacy?

**B** As far as I'm concerned, they can cackle all they want, but there is no greater artist in Suriname. There really isn't. Painters, maybe, but no artist as comprehensive as your grandfather. He could do everything. Not just painting, not just drawing, not just sculpting, he could do everything. And he proved how much expertise and talent he had with the making of Pengel.

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## Part III

**S** Stuart Robles de Medina, **B** Barbara Robles de Medina-Noberg, **A** Amedeo Robles de Medina, and **X** Xavier Robles de Medina comment on the images in the photo album. Stuart Robles de Medina's commentary is based on the 2005 video recording in Part I. The commentary by Barbara Robles de Medina-Noberg, Amedeo Robles de Medina, and Xavier Robles de Medina is taken from the 2023 audio recording in Part II.

## [1]

**S** These are the three Robles de Medinas. Senior, my father; my son Amedeo, he was twelve years old here; and I was forty-two.

**B** René was one of the few German teachers in Suriname, as well as a drawing teacher. He also had an English diploma. That man studied very hard. With all these children. His courses were called LO [primary school teacher diploma], there was no MO in Suriname. Stuart later started the first MO course for drawing.

**X** He was also very closely involved in the making of the statue of Pengel, in fact, we see him appear in this album quite often.

**B** He came to help his son, yes. And also to clean.

**A** All the grandchildren went to Grandpa for tutoring, at the kitchen table, to prepare for the elementary school exam.

**B** Every morning my father-in-law would bring fresh buns. He would go to that Chinese bakery on Manicastraat [Wanicastraat was renamed Johan Adolf Pengelstraat in 2008], and he would get fresh buns, and before he drove back home, he would drive by our place, at Rodestraat, and drop off the buns. Warm buns. Delicious! Butter and chunky peanut butter, with chilli, what! At that time, I used to eat breakfast.

**X** So you also went for tutoring during this period, Dad, because you were eleven then.

**B** Yes, you went together with Diego.

**A** In fifth grade I was able to pass all those tests, for the sixth grade. Thanks to Grandpa René. And a small detail is that he was also born on July 3rd.

**B** Our engagement is also on July 3rd. Yes, you don't know that, but we got engaged on his birthday, July 3rd, 1955.

**A** And six years later, I was born on July 3rd.

**B** And a number of years later, Etienne [Stuart's younger brother] died on July 3rd.

**A** On my fortieth birthday, yes.

**B** Yes, 2001.

**A** And another little detail about Grandpa René: he was officially my first patient after I graduated.

## [2]

**S** This is the final sculpture.

**X** A colour photograph of the statue of Pengel on its pedestal, in Independence Square. So maybe taken in 1974, or even a bit later.

## [3-4]

**S** Then here I have the unveiling. You can see how big, if you compare this man here with the statue. Then you can imagine how that lady was startled then. But you see, when you look at it, those tiny flaws . . . the casting flaws, you don't see them. Ferriz was the first to congratulate me.

**A** On June 5th, 1974, Stuart and Ferriz, he was still governor then.

**B** This is Pengel's wife in [3].

**X** With her back to the camera. And this looks like Arron.

**B** It is Arron, yes.

**X** Did he unveil the statue?

**B** No, Mrs. Pengel was going to unveil it. But maybe the cloth hadn't come off completely, and she needed help.

## [5-6]

**S** This is a design in wax, about eighty centimetres tall, and a sketch of the pedestal on which it was to stand. And so, based on this design, Wim and Kruisland and Sedney granted the approval to start. And then I had to handle everything else with Sedney.

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## Part III

**A** The final phase of the ear plastering; the plaster is up to his lips.

**B** See all those dividing lines?

**A** These are aluminium plates to make those dividing lines of the mould.

## [65-66]

**S** And this is Heymans. And I must say, those guys worked with a lot of enthusiasm and conviction. Really, they loved it.

**A** Ted Heymans.

## [67-69]

**A** And in [67] again you have Diego, and Mr. X, and Dad.

**X** Mr. X is unknown.

## [70]

**A** And here is Diego again.

## [71-74]

**S** And this is it, you see, these are the parts, those separate pieces that are lined with gypsum slabs about 8 mm thick. So Pengel, the sculpture, is 8 mm thick, it's hollow. So, the clay is completely taken out, and then we put in those wax plates, and in those wax plates we put back casting channels and vents. This was part of the hand and the hat.

This guy is a Coronian, he came along with Eric Lie, and he just wanted to help out, just spontaneously help out [72]. But I don't know his name. You'd have to ask Eric Lie that.

**A** Here you see those plaster moulds that have been pulled off the sculpture and are being prepared to be given a wax layer. If you look here at that edge of that mould, here were those aluminium plates, the separation, over his head, and that created this plane. Here, little bowls were taken out, in different places, so that that other part could be put back in, in the exact same position. Do you see a dimple here, here you see it clearly. And a couple of sharp corners here, so that that next one, the other part, the back of the head, could be placed in exactly. And these are those L-shaped hooks that were embedded in the clay. If we go back for a moment, you can see here on the picture [63], those things sticking out.

## [75]

**S** And this is the reverse side of Pengel's face.

**A** Then you see these L-shaped bars. This then stuck to the plaster, and when you take the plaster off, this other part then sticks out. Because this piece was embedded in that clay.

## [76-77]

**S** This is Eric Lie again. And so, this is what those pieces looked like.

**A** This is Linger and Eric Lie.

## [78]

**S** Those then had to be made dust-free; all the grains had to be sucked out. And then those gypsum slabs were put in. And these brackets [75], they hold the wax plate, keep it in place. So that it doesn't sag. That's what the anchors are for.

## [79-82]

**A** And the function of those hooks is so that when that wax layer is applied, as you see here, most of that hook still sticks out. And, on this side, plaster is then applied again. And those hooks then serve to keep those two pieces of plaster the same distance apart.

**S** Here you see it again, the laying of the plates.

**A** And those hooks stick out. Grandpa at work. And eventually that first layer is applied, so plaster is applied here, then it hardens, and then, a mold is put around those two pieces, and over that comes plaster again. So then it's basically looked in.

## [83-86]

**S** You can see how industrious we were in my studio.

**A** Here you can basically see the same process.

**X** And who is that in [84]?

**A** Linger, Doewij in [85], and Stuart and Doewij in [86].

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## [87]

**S** We were constantly busy.

## [88-90]

**S** Here, you see the sprues. This is what the bronze had to flow through. And then you still had-these are a bit thinner-these thin sprues. Those are the vents to let out the air that had built up during the pouring of the bronze . . . that had to get out somewhere.

## [91-95]

**A** The moulds are all ready to be transported to the foundry.

**B** To the Reli company. To be cast.

**S** Look here, you can still see pictures of Martin Luther King, against the wall [92].

## [96]

**S** Here we are resting for a moment.

## [97]

**A** Look, here you see the layer of mesh. Also, steel brackets are placed on it to lift those now heavy bodies, to manoeuvre them.

## [98]

**S** Behind there is another sketch of Martin Luther King.

**A** Here Frank Doewij is finishing that fanned, in which eventually bronze will be cast.

## [99]

**S** And this is in the foundry. This is Walter Lim A Po. Who managed to talk his brother into letting me set up a foundry back there. This is Amedeo and this is my wife.

## [100]

**B** And this is Roel Lim A Po, he was the director of Reli.

**X** And he's Walter's brother—it's his company then?

**B** The company belongs to the family, but he was the director.

**A** It was a family company. I don't know what his father's full name was, but Reli comes from R. E. Lim A Po.

## [101]

**S** This is Rob de Boer. A school friend of mine who worked at Reli.

**B** He and his wife, they were in our group of friends.

## [102]

**S** And here you have the group. Some are from Beekhuizen. This is Kogeldans [third from right], this is Jeffrey [fourth from right]. This guy is an engineer, he worked at Reli [fifth from right]. And this is that firer [far left]. I forgot what his name is. And these are all guys who worked at Reli and were just curious, and the boss allowed them to join in, a bit. And I believe that this was the first piece we cast then. That's what we were drinking to.

**B** Tirzah is not there? How strange.

**A** I think I had gotten time off from school on this day, to witness the casting process. I got time off from Fraser, right? From Hildebrandus [Fraser Hildebrandus, headmaster].

**X** Which school was that?

**A** Aloysius School.

## [103-104]

**S** This is that firer of mine, Luc [103]. And this is that melting furnace. To melt the bronze, so you have your booster. I did all that together with Lim A Po.

**B** Luc came from a government company, the foundry of Beekhuizen. So, in that technical department, there were also various men who came along to help.

**A** Because apparently at Beekhuizen they had experience in casting, because they made their own parts. I think those bolts are parts from Beekhuizen.

**B** Yes, has to be.

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