

# Beyond Traditional Borders

*Jūra, tu drīksti  
palīkt, tāda kā esi,  
jūra, tu drīksti  
vienmēr "tu pati" būt...*

*Jūra, tu drīksti  
sadauzīt vecus vrakus,  
uz grimušu kuģu mastiem  
zaļganās algēs sēt.*

*Jūra, tu drīksti,  
ja vairs citādi nespēj,  
trakot:*

*Jūra, tu drīksti!  
Kāpēc nedrīkstam mēs?*

*Denkend aan Holland  
zie ik breede rivieren  
traag door oneindig  
laagland gaan,  
rijen ondenkbaar  
ijle populieren  
als hooge pluimen  
aan den einder staan;  
en in de geweldige  
ruimte verzonken  
de boerderijen  
verapreid door het land,  
boomgroepen, dorpen,  
geknotte torens,  
kerken en olmen  
in een grootach verband.  
De lucht hangt er laag  
en de zon wordt er langzaam  
in grijze veelkleurige  
dampen gesmoord,  
en in alle gewesten  
wordt de stem van het water  
met zijn eeuwige rampen  
gevreed en gehoord.*

Eight Centuries  
of  
Latvian–Dutch  
relations

Aija Taimiņa

# The Travels of Nikolaus Von Himsel (18<sup>th</sup> Century)

**For several generations it was a tradition in the Von Himsel family of Riga to choose medicine as their field of study.** The Riga City Doctor (“Stadtphysikus”) Joachim Gebhard von Himsel (1701–1751) received a medical doctor’s diploma from Utrecht University; his son Nikolaus von Himsel (1729–1764) also started medical studies in 1747 and traveled to the University of Königsberg. Four years later, in 1751, he finished his studies at Göttingen, where he also earned a medical doctor’s degree under the guidance of the prominent scientist and man of letters Albrecht von Haller.

Not long after returning to Riga in 1752, the young doctor embarked on his longest and most influential tour of Europe, which significantly extended beyond its initial period until 1757. He visited the Netherlands several times and also stayed there for longer periods. Everywhere he was seeking academic contacts and meeting scientists, nature researchers, doctors and collectors, and visiting universities, museums, libraries, botanical gardens, picture galleries, naturalists’ cabinets and laboratories. As an avid collector of varying items, he wanted to become familiar with the most famous university and private collections of the time.

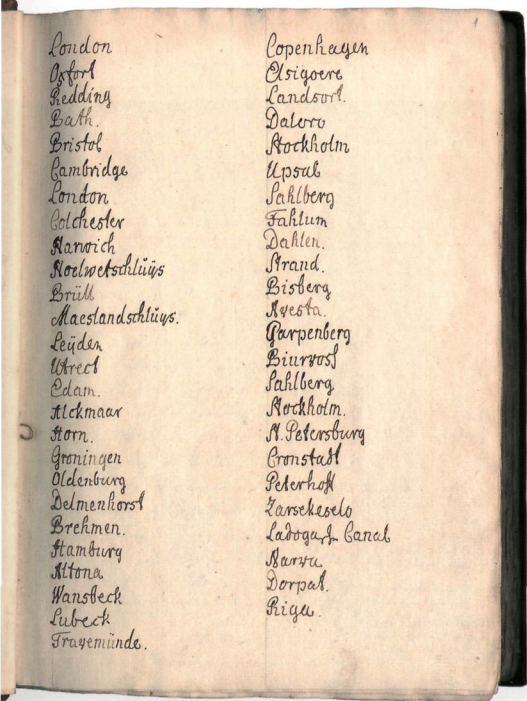
What Von Himsel experienced and saw is recorded in detail in a three volume manuscript in German which the author has structured as a travel diary. The lines of the poem “On traveling” (“über das Reisen”), which Von Himsel chose as an epigraph for his notes, reveal a man who found true fulfillment and joy in gaining new impressions: “Oh Anmut voller Lust, oh höchst beglücktes Leben, so man auf Reisen sucht, so man im Reisen findet: bald fremde Städte Bau, und ihre Schönheit sehen, bald auf der weitem Spur, von ihnen immer gehen [...]“. The still-unpublished handwritten volume is now kept in the Academic Library of Latvia<sup>1</sup>. According to the science historian and Academy of Science of the Latvia member Jānis Stradiņš, “Von Himsel has reflected educated Europe in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century through the perspective of an educated Riga man [...] One has to wonder at how broadminded, multifaceted and energetic the young Riga medic and natural scientist was with the range of his interests, although he has not personally left any important scientific works. [...] However, the most important achievement for history turned out to be the collection of many scientific and artistic relics during the journey.”<sup>2</sup>

Von Himsel donated his collection of scientific and artistic relics to the city of Riga. After his early death (1764), this gift formed the basis for the establishment of the Riga City Museum and in 1773, the first museum in Riga and indeed in the entire Baltic was founded — today's Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation. For their part, his books ended up along with his travel manuscript in the former Riga City Library, now the Academic Library of Latvia.

Von Himsel arrived in Amsterdam 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1752, and traveled both by ship and overland, visiting Zaandam, Haarlem, Leyden, The Hague, Gouda, Delft, Utrecht, and also smaller towns. His impressions of the Netherlands are described in detail in the first and third volumes of his travelogue. Alongside observant descriptions of cities and elaborations on botanical gardens and canals, his notes also include wide-ranging dissertations on naturalists' cabinets and collections.

Selected fragments of the notes tell of his experiences in Amsterdam and Leyden. For several months (in 1752) he lived in Leyden to immerse himself in the prominent university there and its academic environment. Several years later (1756) he returned to meet old friends and look at the collection's new acquisitions. Of note are the descriptions of the collections of Leyden University's professors, who were among the most important scientists in Europe at that time. Nikolaus was especially attracted by physics and optical instruments and hydraulic devices. He observed physical experiments with electricity, as always took an interest in medical matters by watching smallpox vaccinations, and examined irrigation improvements on canals designed to improve sanitary conditions.

The notes of Riga citizen Nikolaus von Himsel in the Academic Library of Latvia are a rich and untapped source for the cultural and scientific history of mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Europe.



Itinerary of Nikolaus von Himsel

### Extracts from Von Himsel's diary

On 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1752, I travelled by stage-coach from Hanover. I passed through Osnabrück and Deventer, from where I took a boat via Kampen across the Zuyder Zee to Amsterdam, where I arrived on 11<sup>th</sup> June. Due to adverse winds, I spent three days on the water, which normally can be crossed in 24 hours.

### Amsterdam

One of the largest trading cities, where its known houses, not including shops, number around 33,000, and whose inhabitants number at least 400,000, including 20,000 Jews. Most streets in Amsterdam are rather narrow, and in front of the houses is a corridor several yards wide. You can move in these streets as comfortably as in a small room. The outward decoration of the houses is not very special, but all the more ornaments and splendour can be seen inside the houses.

It is a well-known fact that the Dutch love cleanliness, but sometimes they overdo it. I was amazed to see how two girls in aprons spent more than an hour cleaning the pavement in front of the entrance door. It was the evening before Sunday, which is why the girls were so diligent and keen on cleanliness and order.

Leyden

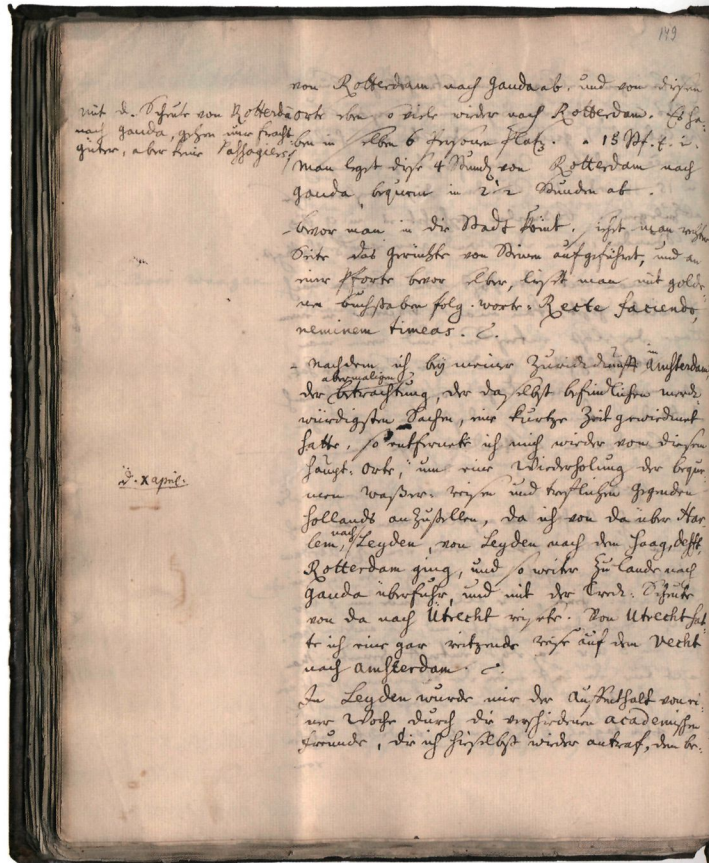
Here I stayed for several months, giving me the opportunity to enhance my knowledge of herbs and natural sciences. The contacts with several professors of this famous academy were of great advantage to me.

They have outstanding men in all departments. The medical department consists of five persons, of whom four (Gaubius<sup>3</sup>, van Royen<sup>4</sup>, de Winter, and Albinus<sup>5</sup> the Younger) are students of the great Boerhaave<sup>6</sup>. The Academy has greatly decreased in significance after the death of Boerhaave and the famous Vitriarius<sup>7</sup>. Whereas previously the lectures of Boerhaave attracted more than 100 listeners, less than half that number of listeners, most of them Dutch, attend the classes of equally famous lecturers today, while these classes used to be gathering places for foreigners from nations far and wide. Yet the decline of the University of Leyden is not caused by the University of Göttingen, notwithstanding Göttingen's medical department and the reputation of the great Haller<sup>8</sup>, who attracts many foreign students.

The Institute of Anatomy is a small building, containing many bodies prepared by Ruysch<sup>9</sup>, among which are many treasures. Skeletons of several animals can be found here, including one of a whale. The Botanical Garden is quite big and well-maintained under the supervision of Mr Van Royen. In a special room, several strange animals and other rarities can be found.

The Library is quite small, and apart from many manuscripts no special works can be found here. The books are almost all in old bindings and badly ordered, while the library is unpretentious. The supervisor Dr Gronovius<sup>10</sup> assured me that Count Bentinck<sup>11</sup>, the Director of the Library, would soon make the necessary arrangements to enrich and decorate the library.

For the rest, Leyden is a rather dull place where hardly anything ever happens. The academy is what keeps the place and most of its inhabitants alive. The alleys and streets for pedestrians in the city, called "singels" (streets alongside canals) are very pleasant, and so are the surroundings of the city, where many excellent gardens can be seen.

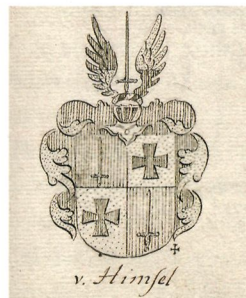


A page from the diary of Nikolaus von Himsel, describing his visit to Leyden



### Smallpox prevention in The Hague

In The Hague, I made the acquaintance of the brothers Schwenke<sup>15</sup>, the elder of which is specialized in anatomy and surgery, the younger in botanical science. The elder has introduced inoculations against children's smallpox in this place, thanks to the support of the most eminent persons of the city, with fortunate results. With his new method, he causes a soft outbreak of a benign form of smallpox by inoculating people with a special cocktail of vaccines, which moreover produce just few pockmarks in the face.



Coat-of-arms  
of the Von Himsel family

### Hydraulic machine invented by Geunete

Here I must mention the hydraulic machine of Mr Geunete<sup>16</sup>, who is presently staying in The Hague. Geunete is an outstanding mechanic, who has a thorough understanding of hydraulics and hydrostatics. He has worked for many years on this machine, which is designed to pump the Lake of Haarlem (Haarlemmermeer) dry. Although many expenses have already been made and Mr Geunete has demonstrated the working of this machine, the work has not yet been realized. Yet he has continued to improve the machine with new applications, for example to move stagnant water in the canals.

The stagnant water in the canals can be very noxious, especially in summer, as the foul vapours, made worse by the heat, cause unbearable smells, infect the air, and cause many diseases. As there is not



A portrait of Nikolaus von Himsel

enough wind to make the water move, Mr Geunete has come up with the idea of installing hydraulic machines at all places in cities where the canals are connected with lakes, the sea or large shipping canals, pumping water from the lakes or large canals into the smaller canals in the cities. The water is thus moved through the canals, making the waters in the canals flow evenly from one hydraulic pump installed at one end of the city to one at the other end.

The obvious benefits of this useful invention raise Mr Geunete's hopes that this plan will be realised. A cleaner air as a result of flowing water and a better and healthier living environment should be sufficient reasons to execute this plan. It would also be pleasant for the inhabitants of the cities to watch the clean water under their windows flow by and enjoy the fresh air, so that they can open their windows safely without bad vapours coming in. I was amazed to find that the canals in this place, after all a seat of government, are not kept in better order and cleaned. I even often saw medical doctors, who should know better how to take precautions, dirty, covered with a thick layer of filthy mud.

## Hiking Through Europe

On 19<sup>th</sup> September, 1925, the Appelboom family left the Netherlands on foot for some sightseeing: father, mother, Cornelia, their daughter aged 5, and son Christian, aged 9. For three years they travelled through Europe, visiting 20 countries. After 16,500 km they arrived in Latvia. They carried with them a vehicle on

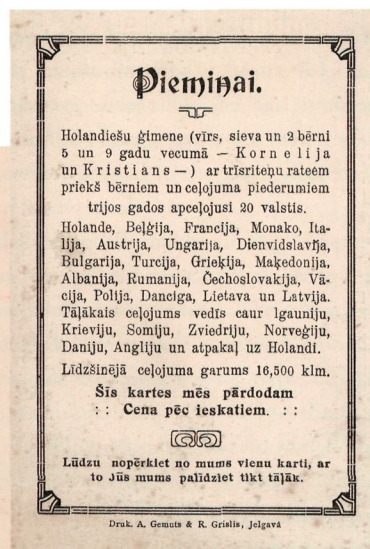
three wheels for the children and luggage. They financed this trip by producing postcards and selling them. This postcard was produced by Gemuts & R. Grīslis in Jelgava.

### Amsterdama — Holande.



Apelbooma ģimene.

**Kājām caur Eiropu.**  
 Ceļojuma apraksts otrā pusē.  
 Ceļojuma sākums 19. septembrī 1925. g.



Postcard describing the itinerary of Appelboom family

"Through Europe on foot" — travelling Appelboom family