

From Lieve Hoogewijs

(translation)

Geneva, 19 October 1986.

(...) *You are welcome at Polambakkam. I do not know exactly what you wish to do and to discover during that time but you can certainly share our life at the centre...*

Claire V.

Haacht, 1st December 2013. I hold Claire's letter in hand, I read it and read it again, and I realize what impact these words have had in my life.

Living in Grimbergen, I knew the Hemerijckx family. Interested in learning more about the deceased doctor (under the trees !), I went to India to visit Polambakkam. I arrived in December 1986. The widow of Dr. Hemerijckx had encouraged me to take this step.

It is here that I met Claire for the first time. She was tall, thin, and her voice had a special stamp. It is there in the fields that I saw the patients, that's when I saw how she was caring for the patients, how she was encouraging them, how she was working. She answered my many questions. I also met Mr. Sadagapan, one of the first patients of Dr. Hemerijckx. He told me so many personal and moving things.

On my return, the Fathers Picpus asked me to bear witness in the Father Damien Museum in Ninde (Tremelo). According to them, my visit to Polambakkam could give more value to the photos of Claire and her team (pictures from the Damien Foundation) which were presented in the corridor of the museum. Since then, I am a voluntary guide in the native house (museum) of Father Damien.

I visited again India with our youngest son to learn more about leprosy and Indian culture. Claire and Cathy welcomed us with open arms.

Years have passed and another slogan drew attention to the museum : *Damien inspired...* so I continued to talk about doctors Hemerijckx and Vellut. Some visitors are coming from the other side of the earth, often with their own history, their testimony.. they also invited me to come and share their lives... they wanted to be like Claire.

Although I have had less contacts with Claire, I still regularly asked for her opinion. In one of her last e-mails she told me about Baba Amte. She was, in every sense of the word, a great lady and for me she remains a very dear and deep souvenir.

Lieve Hoogewijs

The picture of Claire at the Damien Musuem in Tremelo.

