

Arletta Jacobs

A pioneer in many realms—birth control, women’s suffrage, peace activism, and envisioning a wider future for women—Aletta Henriette Jacobs was born on February 9, 1854, in the small town of Sappemeer, Netherlands, the eighth of eleven children of Abraham Jacobs, a country doctor, and Anna de Jongh. Her assimilated Jewish family maintained social and intellectual ties with other Jewish families in the area.

When still a child, accompanying her adoring father on his visits to patients, she already yearned to be a doctor, but as she grew older she was constrained and disheartened by the schooling then available for young women. Two Jewish physicians who were close family friends provided support: Dr. L. Ali Cohen guided her to start training for pharmacy as an interim goal; after Jacobs received crucial letters of permission from the liberal minister J.R. Thorbecke, Dr. S.S. Rosenstein, rector of the University of Groningen, welcomed her admission to the faculty of medicine.

She began her studies in 1871 at the University of Groningen, where she and her sister Charlotte were the first female students. Overcoming bouts of illness, she graduated on March 8, 1879 as the first woman physician in the Netherlands. She promptly traveled to London and, while pursuing further clinical training, soon moved into the orbit of various British radicals and freethinkers, including birth-control advocates and suffrage leaders.

She set up her medical practice in Amsterdam and began to have a significant impact on women’s health. She introduced the pessary (diaphragm) to the Netherlands despite intense opposition from male colleagues, held a free clinic for poor women two mornings a week, and campaigned to change the unhealthy working conditions of salesgirls.

A small and slender woman, she married Carel Victor Gerritsen, a Dutch grain merchant, legislator and reformer, in 1892, after a long acquaintance. They enjoyed an egalitarian relationship, their otherwise happy and productive life together marred only by one devastating loss: the child they longed for lived only a day.

The International Council of Women’s 1899 meeting in London had a galvanizing effect on Jacobs. There she met inspiring leaders such as Susan B. Anthony with whom she had been acquainted only through correspondence. In 1903 she gave up her medical practice and committed herself to the struggle for women’s suffrage, becoming in that year president of the Dutch suffrage organization. When the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) came into being in Berlin in 1904, she further expanded her activities. After her husband’s death in 1905 from cancer and a period of depression, she resumed her suffrage work, traveling through the Austro-Hungarian empire in the fall of 1906 with IWSA president Carrie Chapman Catt. She hosted a brilliantly successful IWSA conference in the Netherlands in 1908. She also brought feminist social and economic theory to the Netherlands by

translating Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1900), and Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labor* (1910).

She and Catt traveled together again in 1911–12 on a sixteen-month itinerary including South Africa, the Middle East, India, Ceylon, the Dutch East Indies, Burma, the Philippines, China and Japan. They looked into the situation of women and, when they could, encouraged women to improve their lot. Throughout the journey Jacobs wrote lively reports for the Dutch paper *De Telegraaf*.

After the outbreak of war in 1914, Jacobs strove to use her international network to try to stop the slaughter. With a small group of planners, she called for an international women's conference at the Hague and invited the acclaimed American reformer Jane Addams to chair the proceedings. Despite the resistance of governments and the hazards of wartime travel, a resilient group of women from belligerent and neutral nations convened at the Hague from April 28 to May 1, 1915, and passed farsighted resolutions. Jacobs participated in one of the two small post-conference delegations, her group traveling through a war-obsessed Europe, meeting with leaders of the belligerent nations to encourage mediation. In September 1915 she voyaged to the United States in an unsuccessful attempt to persuade President Woodrow Wilson to mediate the conflict.

During and after the war she continued to lead Dutch women in their struggle for suffrage. Victory came in 1919. That year she and others from the Hague group founded the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Her health weakened and her finances straitened, she spent her later years in close contact with her dear friends the Broese van Groenou, still traveling to conferences and speaking her mind, and receiving honors and appreciation from Dutch women and from abroad. She died on August 10, 1929, in Baarn, Netherlands.