

A FEW YEARS IN PRISON WOULD DO ANYONE GOOD

Michel Spekkers: The Netherlands

Words: Bouke Sonnega

Michel Spekkers (age 28) has dark hair and dark eyes. He's polite, kindhearted but he also comes across as cautious. When he talks about his past, the year he spent in an American prison and the road that led him there, his eyes shoot restlessly across the room. Now, he's quite a prominent person in the public life of the city of Breda, The Netherlands. As an ex-city council member for the Socialist Party, people know who he is. The road to here has been long, and he's probably not even halfway to where he wants to be - even if he doesn't know where that may be. His is a story about fraud, prison and trying to find a place in the world.

As always, things started going wrong at quite a young age. His parents got divorced when Michel was seven years old.

"I was young and, basically, very uncertain and afraid", says Michel when asked about what got him into fraud. "As all things do, it started with small, relatively innocent things, white lies. I wanted people to like me and the people I hung around slowly started moving up the wrong path. It all went slow, only in hindsight am I able to pinpoint certain events and things as pivotal. I didn't notice it at the time."

He left home when he was sixteen years old. "It was sudden, not carefully planned at all. I had a row and I just decided to leave." After a period of leading a nomad-like existence in The Netherlands, he settled in the town of Petten, where he decided to start an internet-based shop. "I was always fumbling around making websites and I decided to make a living out of it. That's when it really went wrong, it was a fraudulent business. I didn't always send people the goods they paid for - just enough so I could slip through. The people who worked for me then didn't know they were involved in swindling. They thought they were working for an honest business."

It was only a matter of time before things went wrong. After the police raided the place, Michel fled to Heerlen, a city at the other end of The Netherlands. "I tried to make things right there, but it was already too late. Several Dutch crime TV shows were already hunting me, my name was out there. So I decided to flee the country." The 'flight' started with a trip to the Dominican Republic. His intention, then, was to take a holiday. Take his mind off things before going back and face the consequences back in home. "But when I got back here things were already too far down the road. I knew then I couldn't fix things from here."

He went to Mexico and made his way from place to place with the help of a false press-pass and a handy cam he had bought. He pretended to work for a Dutch television show. "In hindsight I think Mexico really made me look different upon the world. The people there, they're just different. They are kind, they let you in their homes, they feed you and they are, in general, welcoming people. It was an eye-opener in a way. This is also how things can be done."

Then came a choice that in his own words "might have been the only big mistake". He decided to go to America. There, he began to forge cheques. "It's a method of payment that is largely out of use in Holland, but is still very much alive in America. And it was also a relatively easy way to make money. I tried to only pry on the rich, because I knew they had insurance. The downside was that I couldn't live in the same place for more than a few weeks because that was the time the authorities needed to figure out what was going on."

This could, of course, only last for so long. After he got caught, he spent twenty-one months in two different American prisons. "Prison changes you. It's a very violent and scary atmosphere, especially in America. We slept with fifty-eight people in one hall. Ninety percent of the inmates are a member of some gang. In jail, people judge you based on what you have done. It's a universe of its own."

Prison life changed Michel in ways that are still noticeable and visible today. Not in the least for himself. "It really toughens you. I'm not easily scared anymore. Your moral framework gets, to some point, rearranged. You accept more from other people. I won't back down from conflicts that I probably would have run far away from when I was younger." "But

that's not all. There's also a huge impact on your personal life. I was never the easiest person to make good friends, and that's only gotten more difficult. Intimacy, sex, that all became incredibly difficult for me."

In the year 2006, more than two years after Michel left for Mexico, he's back on Dutch soil. Much to his own surprise, he isn't arrested straight away. He's free to go and, frankly, scared to death. "It's one of the few moments in my life that I've been utterly scared. There was so much uncertainty here, back home. You have to know that inside, you know everyone. Everyone looks the same, you know what they did, what gang or group they are in. At Schiphol, there were just thousands of people, all different, all unknown. I didn't 'know' anyone. It was terrible."

It was only a short time before he got arrested in Holland again, for the frauds he committed here. "I did time in America, but things in Holland were still unresolved. So when word got around that I came back, it was only a matter of time." Another few months in prison, he came out bankrupt, under strict supervision of a financial executor. And free, for the first time in almost three years.

"I immediately knew I wanted to do something meaningful with my life. This might sound sappy, but I've always held on to my principles. I started by teaching young children and students about the dangers of a life in crime and the seemingly easy and wrong way that it is. But I wanted to do more. I moved to Breda in 2007 to study here, because that seemed like the logical thing to do. A new start with a diploma that just seemed right at the time. It wasn't. The distance between me, the other students and the university was just too great."

So he went on to other things. He founded his own company, Conexq, to continue giving information to students about crime.

In 2008 he won a prize with a website he constructed. Jijendeoverheid.nl [youandtheauthorities] was founded with the idea of closing the gap between the government and its people. "Often, people can't find the proper official authorities if they want to get anything from the government. The website helped to close that gap; to guide

people, and make the authorities more accessible for everyone. That's still one of the biggest problems in our governmental system."

He became active for the Socialist Party (SP) in Breda. After setting up a local youth division called Rood (Red), things went fast. A year later he found himself occupying a seat for the SP in the city council. A position he would occupy for more than two years. "I really wanted to help, to be a force for good. That position seemed like a perfect way to do that. I could help people from there, on both small and very large scales. I became a spokesman for the local squatting-group, too. That's still one of the issues most close to my heart. There are people who're getting evicted every day. Low-cost social housing is being demolished to make room for expensive apartments every day. And the original residents are left in the cold."

"That's also where Kickstart came from. I really wanted to make a statement that you don't need a lot of money or expensive real estate to make something good happen." Kickstart, Michel's current project, is based around young entrepreneurs. In old office buildings, shops and other empty property, young businesses get a chance to develop themselves. It's, as the name suggests, meant as a kickstart. "We can rent those empty properties very cheaply, because nothing would be done with them anyway. So we can rent them out for very little money. So we can really give young people and new businesses a chance to develop that's not only cheap, but also relatively risk-free. If it fails, there are no damages or contracts."

Two things spring to mind when reading about his projects. They are all aimed at the community and there is quite a lot of them in a short time span. That's because, after all these years, Michel is still searching for his place in the world. "I don't believe in the system as it is now. Everything here, and in all of the Western world revolves around money. Around capital and, especially now, it's ruining people's lives. I don't believe in that system. I never have and I never will, and my experiences in prison have only strengthened that belief. Ultimately, the problem is not the capital, but what it does to people. Everyone is programmed to think about their own problems, their own needs. It can be an extremely lonely existence here, especially if you don't fit the image. People get lonely, and people don't care."

“Ultimately, I don’t think I’ll stay. There’s still a big part of me that wants to move back to Mexico, or South-America. People there have a way of living their life that’s far closer to what I’m looking for. No-one will die of hunger in Mexico if there’s anyone who has food to share. It’s just another world.”