

Marga Klompé: Scientist, politician and champion of the underprivileged (1912-1986)



Marga Klompé was a scientist and teacher who was active in the Dutch resistance during the Second World War. She became a member of the Dutch Parliament in 1948 and was one of the negotiators of the United Nations' Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

In 1952 Klompé became the first female member of the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community, the forerunner of the European Parliament. There she contributed to the work that led to the Treaties of Rome. In 1956 she became the Netherlands' first female government minister and one of her achievements was the country's first law on universal social protection.

Early years

Margaretha Albertina Maria 'Marga' Klompé, was born on 16 August 1912 in Arnhem, the Netherlands. She was the second of five children born to Johannes Klompé, who owned a stationery shop, and Ursula Verdang, a first generation German immigrant.

When Klompé's father became sick and lost his business in the 1930s, the family was plunged into poverty. This first-hand experience of poverty had a deep effect on Klompé. She went on to become a champion of the marginalised and underprivileged.

A bright student, Klompé went to Utrecht University in 1929 where she gained a masters degree in 1937. She taught chemistry and physics at the Mater Dei High School for girls in Nijmegen between 1932 and 1949 and was awarded a PhD in mathematics and physics in 1941. The following year she began studying medicine but the Second World War stopped her from finishing the course. Klompé joined the Dutch underground resistance, where she became a leader, building a large network of women volunteers.

Breaking new ground for women in politics

After the end of the war, Klompé moved into politics, an uncommon role for women at this time. A member of the Catholic People's Party, she was sworn into the lower house of the Dutch Parliament, the House of Representatives, in August 1948. Klompé was a member of the Dutch delegation to the United Nations where she served on the UN General Assembly's Third Committee, which dealt with human rights and humanitarian issues, and was involved in negotiating the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Marga Klompé became the first female member of the European Coal and Steel Community's Common Assembly, the forerunner of today's European Parliament, which held its first session in 1952. Before direct elections took place in 1979, members were delegates of their national parliaments. In 1955, Klompé was appointed to a working party set up by the Assembly that focused on improving the implementation and

extending the powers of the European Coal and Steel Community and on creating a single market that extended beyond the coal and steel sector.

In 1956, Klompé left the Assembly to join the Dutch centre-left coalition government, headed by Prime Minister Willem Drees, as the Netherlands' first female minister. As Minister of Social Work, one of her greatest achievements was the General Assistance Act, which replaced the earlier poor law. The legislation, which came into force in 1965, made social protection a right for everyone. She sought to shift the focus away from charity and towards strengthening the provision of social protection by the state.

Her legacy also includes the Elderly Homes Bill to address ageing in Dutch society and the Caravan Bill to support people with a nomadic lifestyle. She was Minister of Culture, Recreation and Social Work between 1966 and 1971 in the cabinet of Prime Minister Piet de Jong. In 1971, Klompé was given the title of Minister of State, an honour granted in the Netherlands to senior politicians of great merit at the end of their career.

After leaving politics Klompé continued to campaign for international justice and social responsibility, including criticism of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Klompé had a strong Catholic faith. Pope Paul VI appointed her as chair of the Dutch National Commission for Justice and Peace and she was one of the founders of the union of Catholic female graduates and of the Catholic women's volunteer service.

Marga Klompé was respected and admired as a woman of great faith, humanity and personal conviction. The high esteem in which she was held is reflected by the many streets, schools and health facilities in the Netherlands that carry her name. Marga Klompé died on 28 October 1986 in The Hague.