

This biography is a fitting tribute to a beloved church pioneer who was unexpectedly taken to glory, just before taking up an important task. The story of Jules (Jelle) Van Popta is a remarkable one and it has fallen to the youngest to give an account of his father's struggle and triumph. We gain a uniquely personal perspective of some of the ecclesiastical issues that have faced our church federation. The details of the early years in Canada will no doubt resonate with all children of Dutch immigrants. We have benefitted enormously from the choices of those who, post WW II, voyaged across the Atlantic to make a new beginning for themselves and their offspring. How the Lord has blessed those who had the courage to cast their bread upon the waters! With this book, George van Popta goes beyond family history, as fascinating as this is, and salutes all parents who journeyed as pilgrims in a strange land, never losing sight of the heavenly city.

PETER BUIST — Professor-Emeritus of Chemistry,
Carleton University

Man of the First Hour is a personal account of a loving son who invites the reader into the life and times of Rev. Jules Van Popta. It's a glimpse behind the scenes presented in a multidimensional narrative that touches on topics including family, church, struggles, war, and immigration. Using a combination of personal recollections and fragments of letters, documents, and articles, the author sketches an honest portrait of a "good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:21).

Warmly recommended to all readers interested in biography, church history, immigration history, and the early history of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

CHRISTINE VAN HALEN-FABER — Principal of
Covenant Canadian Reformed Teachers College

Man of the First Hour is a delightful examination of the life and times of one of the faithful intrepid ministers the Lord used to institute the Canadian Reformed Churches in the 1950s. Rev. Jules Van Popta was a godly man, who was granted an excellent cognitive ability which he used generously for the benefit of the churches and his fellow believers. This ability was accompanied by human characteristics which added difficulties as well as humour to his life. Sympathetically written, this book is recommended not only as an enjoyable read, but as a good lesson in church history and polity.

THEA HEYINK — author of several fiction books



Man of the First Hour

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Man of the First Hour

— *A Son's Story* —

...

Jules Taco
Van Popta

GEORGE VAN POPTA

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Dedicated to my siblings,
Joanna, Sarah, Alida, Tako, and John
in memory of our parents,
Jules and Helen Van Popta



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	xi
1. Family Roots	1
2. Youth	9
3. Taeke's Imprisonment and Death	19
4. Jules's Church Struggle	35
5. Called to the Ministry	45
6. Immigration	53
7. Edmonton	63
8. Burnout	83
9. Recovery	95
10. Cloverdale	109
11. Legacy	125
Appendices:	
1. Six Points of General Synod 1942 of the GKN	141
2. Letter to the Reformed Church of Santpoort, the Netherlands	143
3. Unions	147
4. Incarnation, Immigration, and Integration	161
5. Spaceflight in the Light of the Scripture	167
6. A Calvinistic Concept of Authority and Liberty in the State	177
7. Either Faith or Science?	185
8. Descartes	189
9. Sermon on 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11	199
10. Sermon on Zechariah 1:7–21	207
11. Sermon on Lord's Day 11	217
Bibliography	226

PREFACE

My parents, Jules and Helen Van Popta, emigrated from the Netherlands to Canada in 1951. This book, a biography of Jules, is being published on the 70th anniversary of their arrival in Canada.

Someone may ask why I think it worthwhile to publish a biography about my father. It is a good question and deserves an answer.

Dr. Jannes (John) Smith, professor of Old Testament at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS), encouraged me to write it. I was telling him about how two of my sisters had recently downsized from large family homes in which they had lived for many years into smaller ones. In the course of moving, they had both come across envelopes and files of letters, articles, and other personal items that my father had left behind when he died in 1968. After a brief discussion on our siblings email group it was decided that the material would come to me. When I told John about this, he urged me to write a biography saying that these stories need to be told by my generation, while the memories are still alive.

Reading through the letters was an amazing experience. As I was only ten years old when my father died, I had not come to know him well. He was a kind, gentle, and loving father, and my memories of him are only good, but I did not have the opportunity to develop a mature relationship with him. Reading these letters, mostly written in Dutch, let me get somewhat into his head.

Dad had nearly illegible handwriting and so he typed out his letters and, with carbon paper, kept a copy for himself. The letters are to family in the Netherlands, parishioners, colleagues, friends, railway companies, banks, and even to Revenue Canada. His terrible

handwriting was a blessing in disguise as many of the letters would have been lost had he written them with pen and ink.

Although the letters span 1951 to his death, he wrote most of them in 1960. Early that year my father suffered a severe and sustained nervous breakdown. For various reasons he completely burned out. I write about that in chapter 8. To recover, it was imperative that he have a complete change of environment. He left Edmonton, where we then lived, and was away from home for about a half year. During his time away he wrote my mother, and also the children, as often as twice per week. The letters are sweet as he wrote about his love for Mom, a bit disconcerting when he related what things were like for him while in the dark depths of his depression, and hilarious as he describes some of his antics with his dear friend, colleague, and host, the late Rev. Johannes (Hans) Mulder of Carman, Manitoba.

Dad had the distinction of being the first Canadian Reformed minister. The first few churches had been instituted in 1950 and the Edmonton Church extended a call to Dad in 1951. As I write in chapter 7, the first years were incredibly busy for Dad and Mom. He was gone sometimes for weeks at a time travelling by train all over Western Canada, visiting, encouraging, administering word and sacraments, ordaining office-bearers, and helping to institute congregations. He was chairman of the first general synod (1954), vice-chairman of the second (1958), a delegate to the third (1962), and delegated also to the fourth (1965), which he organized on behalf of Edmonton, the convening church.

He was delegated to the fifth synod (1968) as well but did not attend because he lay ill in the hospital—so ill that he died, on November 30. He died of complications after gall bladder surgery. The surgery was performed two months earlier but he did not recover. It was in the days before laparoscopic surgery was being done, and so it meant a major operation. He was attacked by infections that could not be beaten.

The 1968 synod established the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CRTS) and appointed three full-time

professors and two part-time lecturers. Synod appointed my father as the professor of systematic theology and related fields. Dad would have loved the new calling. Previous synods had appointed him as one of the provisional professors to teach men in the years that it was not yet considered feasible to have a seminary, and Dad loved this teaching. He would have rejoiced at the opportunity to serve in a full-time capacity, but in the unquestionable, inscrutable, and always good providence of God, Jules Taco Van Popta did not serve in this post.

I decided to refer to Dad as Jules, the English name he assumed. And I refer to Mom by her English name Helen. In this preface, and again in chapter 11, which is an essay about Dad's legacy, I refer to them as Dad and Mom.

I find it interesting that Dad capitalized the "V" of "Van" whereas nowadays people of Dutch heritage are often adopting the older way of using lower-case "v" in "van." He probably thought that "Van" looked more Canadian. Interesting. That's all.

This book has quite a few appendices: eleven, which seems like many considering that I tell Dad's story in eleven chapters. I included them so that the reader could hear my father, in his own voice, treat a wide variety of topics: theological, homiletical, ecclesiastical, ethical, sociological, scientific, and philosophical. He had many interests. The reader should realize that they were written by someone for whom English was a second language. The English is not perfect, but the messages are clear. As for the actual story, it is mostly chronological and somewhat thematic.

Dad's English Bible was the King James Version. The KJV was in common use in those days, and it's what my father also used. You may notice that in his sermons and articles. Dad had the habit of capitalizing pronouns for God, and I left that as was his custom.

Dad had feet of clay, as we all do. He was a sinner in need of the redeeming grace of God in Jesus Christ. Scores of faithful ministers have served in the Canadian Reformed Churches. In that way there was nothing special about my father. We do not subscribe to

the principle of *primus inter pares*, first among equals. My father considered himself to be one among equals. I recall that I, as a seven- or eight-year-old, asked him, “Daddy, is it true that you were the first minister in Canada?” He said, “No, there have been many, many ministers before me.” I think he knew what I meant, but he answered well.

When he died he was busy publishing a series of articles in which he mentioned the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). He wanted it to be understood that there was a faithful and vibrant church scene on the North American continent well before post-war Dutch immigrants began instituting Canadian Reformed churches in the 1950s. He emphasized that the church was worldwide and firmly resisted sectarianism of any kind.

Is it fitting and proper for me to write my father’s biography considering what he said to me and what he wrote in his last article before he died? I think it is, as long as we do not praise men. As at all times, all praise must go to God alone. Only he is worthy of our praise.

At the same time, God uses men and women to build his church. He used my father, first for a few years in the Netherlands, and then for seventeen in Canada. We can be thankful for what he gave the churches in the person of Jules Taco Van Popta. In 1 Corinthians 4:2 the apostle says, “*Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.*” My father was a talented, intelligent, scholarly man, an able preacher, a well-loved pastor and friend, but at the end of it all it can be said that he was faithful. At the still young age of 51, but at the Lord’s good time, he was received into the presence of his Lord, and he would have heard those blessed words, “*Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.*”

I found much to work with in Dad’s letters, articles, and papers, both published and unpublished. I was also helped greatly by the story Mom had written some years ago for her children and grandchildren. She wanted them to know how good God has been to

our family despite Dad's early death and her almost four decades of widowhood. As well, my sister Sarah had written something for the family which she called *Remember When?* She ended with the words "To be continued." Well, I hope that my efforts can be considered a worthy continuation.

There are many that I need to thank. Since my father lived long before computers, he typed out his articles, sermons, and papers on a typewriter. Annette Leyenhorst and my granddaughter Juliana, who often goes by "Jules," retyped them by computer and thus digitized them. Several people read through the manuscript and provided valuable comments and suggestions: Dr. William Helder, Dr. Christine Van Halen-Faber, Dr. John Smith, Dr. Peter Buist, and Mrs. Thea Heyink.

I also want to express my gratitude to RP Press for publishing my book. Thanks especially to Dr. Chris de Boer, who helped to guide this book along through the publication process. Thanks also to Mr. Bill van Beek for the cover design, for typesetting the manuscript, and for patiently and diligently making many revisions and changes, large and small.

I owe much thanks to my editor, my sister Sarah Vandergugten, a retired high school teacher well qualified for the task. At the beginning I felt that she did not want to be too hard on her little brother, but I told her that I did not want the book to be mediocre; I was striving for excellence. The reader will need to judge whether excellence has been achieved. I bear the blame if it has not. My sister was a very good editor, but any infelicities remain my responsibility.

I also thank my wife Dora, who supported and encouraged me in my efforts. I am supposed to be retired, but I spend too much time in my study.

My penultimate thanks go to my five older brothers and sisters: Joanna, Sarah, Alida, Tako, and John. This was in many ways a joint project. As I wrote the chapters I would send them to my siblings for comment. As they knew Dad better than I did, I wanted to be sure that I was getting the stories straight.

We had interesting discussions about facts and details. For instance, how many bedrooms did the house in Jasper Place have? Which room did Oma use when she came for an extended visit in 1956? My three sisters had differing memories about it. Dora and I were speaking about this interesting phenomenon when she perceptively remarked, “It’s kind of like the synoptic gospels.”

I absolutely could not have done this without my siblings. Thanks for your help and encouragement. I love you all very much and value our deep friendship. I dedicate this book to the five of you and in memory of our much loved Dad and Mom.

My final thanks go to my heavenly Father. He is so good. I thank him for the godly parents he gave us—for Jules and Helen Van Popta. May this book honour them and glorify our God!

George van Popta

Unless otherwise noted
the photos are from family albums.

CHAPTER ONE

FAMILY ROOTS

Jules Taco was born in North Holland, but he was in fact of Frisian heritage. When the family trees are traced back generations as far as they can, they never leave Friesland but are firmly planted in the soils of the northern coastal province of the Netherlands.

MOTHER

Jules's mother, Sara Regina Bruinsma, was born on July 24, 1882, in the small village of Midlum near the Wadden Sea in Friesland, the Netherlands. Sara was the twelfth and last child of farmer Seerp Jans Bruinsma (1843–1918) and his wife, Aafke Gerrits Koudenburg (1844–1920). Although eleven siblings had preceded her, only four sisters and a brother were still alive on the day of her birth. Sadly, seven of her siblings had died in their infancy or youth. Her one brother was Jan, named after his paternal grandfather, but he was predeceased by four brothers named “Jan,” all of whom had died in their infancy. According to tradition the eldest son was to be named after his paternal grandfather; hence the five boys named “Jan.”

Little is known of Sara's youth other than that she grew up on a farm under the care of God-fearing parents. She would have been baptized in St. Nicholas church in Midlum. In all likelihood her

MAN OF THE FIRST HOUR

family left the increasingly liberal Reformed Church¹ in the second secession,² 1886, led by the Rev. Dr. Abraham Kuyper.

She went to the small neighbourhood school where her elder sister Jetske was a teacher. Jetske would marry the headmaster of the town of Dokkum in 1899. As a young girl Sara was in a rather good position herself to go to school, which was not a given in those days.

Sara's father, Seerp, was watchful of his four daughters. When suitors came a-calling they first had to play a game of chess with him before they could "go walking" with the daughter they were sweet on. Seerp took interminably long between moves, but the boys soon learned a trick to speed things along. After about an hour, and just a few moves, they would excuse themselves to use the outhouse. While they were gone Seerp would rearrange some pieces strategically so that he would be able to say "checkmate" after only a few more moves. Seerp could boast another win and the young man could go for a walk around the village with his girl.

FATHER

Taeke Wiepkes van Popta was one of these young men. He had his eye on Sara. Nothing is known of their courtship other than that Seerp approved of Taeke's proposal and gave his precious youngest child and daughter to be wed to Taeke on August 26, 1909, in the town hall at Franekeradeel. They were both twenty-seven years old, and Jules was one of the children they received.

Taeke was born on January 7, 1882, in the Frisian village of IJlst, about forty kilometres distance from Midlum. He was the eighth

1 *Hervormde Kerk*. At that time the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church) was the state church.

2 The first secession from the *Hervormde Kerk* began in 1834 and was led by the Rev. Hendrik de Cock in the Groningen town of Ulrum. The second secession occurred in 1886 and was led by the Rev. Dr. Abraham Kuyper. Most of the churches of the first secession and the churches of the second secession united in 1892 forming the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands).

CHAPTER 1 – FAMILY ROOTS

child of Wiepke Eiberts van Popta, a farmer, and Elisabeth Jelles Wijnia, both born in 1850. He was one of eleven children, of whom several died in their infancy or youth. Taeke was one of four brothers that reached adulthood.

Taeke was descended from a long line of farmers. It was assumed that he also would be a farmer. He worked the land and milked the cows but his heart was not in it. He always had a book with him and would read and study during the breaks, and even while milking.

He wanted to become a teacher; however, once he had turned nineteen years old he reported to the nearest recruiting office as all young men were required to do. He stated that he was a farmer and studied in the evening, but neither of these facts presented a reason for the militia to excuse him from military duty. He was declared fit, physically and mentally, but there were more than enough recruits. Taeke was fortunate. By way of a lottery he was released from duty. He would be able to continue his great love of learning.

Taeke began his career as a teacher in 1906 at the Christian School in the Frisian village of Marrum. Two years later he moved to Gorinchem, near Rotterdam. It was at that time that he and Sara were married. In those days it was inconceivable that one should marry unless he had the means to support a wife and children. Thankfully, Taeke was already employed as a teacher on their wedding day. Sara had no special training and was still living with her parents in her childhood home on the day she became Taeke's wife.

For an unknown reason, Sara's mother was not at the wedding ceremony which took place at the town hall. Taeke's parents were there as was Sara's father, but not her mother. But there is in the records at the town hall a letter drawn up by a notary which says, "Aafke Gerrits Koudenburg living in Midlum, wife of Mr. Seerp Jans Bruinsma, farmer in Midlum, hereby declares that she gives her consent to the marriage which her daughter Sara Regina Bruinsma of Midlum intends to enter into with Mr. Taeke van Popta, a teacher in Gorinchem."

Taeke and Sara would have eight children, of whom Jules, born in 1916, was the sixth child and the youngest son.

MAN OF THE FIRST HOUR

Taeke's first love was books and learning. He took up the practice of placing his feet in a pail of cold water to stay awake into the night. Over the years he earned many diplomas, in French, High German, Mathematics, and two in Business Science.

After a few years in Gorinchem, he applied for and was appointed to the position of headmaster of the new Christian elementary and secondary Groen van Prinsterer School in IJmuiden, a harbour city in North Holland. And so the family moved to IJmuiden and lived for many years in a house attached to the school. That was where they were living when Jules was born. He was named Jelle after one of Taeke's brothers. Taeke taught for thirty years until his retirement from the profession. Under his leadership the IJmuiden school flourished.

Taeke's interests were diverse and, because of his broad and deep learning, he was a blessing to many, in church, school, and society. In 1914 he was one of the co-founders of the Christian Sailors' Union in the Netherlands. This organization was primarily intended to prevent strikes in the fishing industry. He also organized the Christian Seamen's Association. Although not a sailor himself, he was interested in the sea, perhaps largely because his brother Eibert was captain in the Dutch merchant marines and sailed his own ship.

Taeke was also involved in many teachers' societies and associations, and he seemed to take a special interest in the church youth clubs, both local and national. He often gave private lessons in French and German. He was a good teacher but woefully absent-minded. Sometimes several students would come at the same hour. Sara always sent them upstairs to Taeke's study. She thought her husband should be the one to sort things out.

Taeke was politically active as chairman of the local Anti-Revolutionary Electoral Association. He was known to advocate for indigent families in Friesland who had to make do with very little to pay rent and feed their children. He was behind a more generous unemployment benefit for such families.

Although he retired from his profession, Taeke remained very active in matters to do with church, education, and politics. Then came

CHAPTER 1 – FAMILY ROOTS

World War II. The Netherlands, after five days, fell before the Nazi juggernaut on May 15, 1940. Taeke was vocal in his opposition against the National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands, a Dutch organization sympathetic to the German Nazis. Not surprisingly, his outspoken speeches and articles soon ended up on the Nazi radar. This would lead to his death in Sachsenhausen, a Nazi concentration camp near Berlin.³



Jules's paternal grandfather:
Wypke Eiberts van Popta
(1849-1916).



Jules's paternal grandmother:
Elisabeth Jelles Wynia
(1849-1932).

3 This story of Taeke, Jules's father, is told in chapter 3.

MAN OF THE FIRST HOUR



Jules's maternal grandparents (centre): Aafke Gerrits Koudenburg (1844-1920) and Seerp Jans Bruinsma (1843-1918). Standing are Jules's parents. Seated left to right: Jules's cousin Botte, Sister Aafke, Jules, sister Truus, brother Jan.

CHAPTER 1 – FAMILY ROOTS

Jules's mother: Sara
Regina Bruinsma
(1882-1959).



Jules's father: Taeke W. van
Popta (1882-1945).