

# Jan Karel, The Decider

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## 1 Introduction

It is common (or should be) that a *Liber Amicorum* contains only paeans on the lucky guy. In that vein, or perhaps in contrast, here I give some anecdotes having to do with Jan Karel Lenstra. All of them also pertain to me. Therefore “I” occurs regularly.

## 2 In the Old Days

I met Jan Karel first in the old Mathematical Centre housed in an old school building at the second Boerhaavestraat in Amsterdam. This was a long time ago. Yet even then he gave the impression of being a “decider”. This seems to be a common theme in these remembrances.

In that time Jan Karel was a member of the Operation Research group (called the equivalent of “Decision Theory” in Dutch) at the institute. I solved a self-posed problem that involved the difficulty of finding solutions to a certain problem. I recall it fondly, because it evoked the Number of the Beast—666—from graphs. This was later published in a nontechnical math journal.

Returning to the main paper, the literature I looked at told me that only decisions could be hard (or had a name exemplifying the hardness). Thus I went to consult Jan Karel. He looked at me piercingly and gave me the name—deW—of a mathematical colleague I should consult. I did so and the article was eventually published.

Quite some time later they advertised a professorial job at the University of Tilburg. It was in a subject, say X, which now escapes me. “You have to apply,” Jan Karel told me. “I know nothing about X, I don’t even know what X means,” I said. “That doesn’t matter,” JK said, “They don’t know that themselves, that is why they look for a professor.” “I don’t want to go to Tilburg,” I said. But finally I let myself be convinced (that I should apply) although I secretly thought that in the unlikely event they gave me an offer, I could always refuse. But Jan Karel gave me the impression that they were dying for me and waited to see what I would do (once appointed) with X.

Jan Karel was very insistent, he even offered to drive me from Amsterdam to Tilburg, and the other way. I forget if he was associated with that university at the time. By the way, it went or goes by the acronym

“KUB” (Katholieke Universiteit Brabant). So we went together to the KUB. Once there, Jan Karel disappeared and I was interviewed by a group of about 10 people who didn't look familiar at all. “How are you going to give content to X,” they asked. “First tell me what X is,” I asked. “Well, we advertised for a professor in X, so a candidate can surely tell us what X is,” they countered. From then on the interview went down-hill. “Well, too bad,” Jan Karel said on the way back to Amsterdam “but it was worth a try.”

### 3 Modern Times

For some time Jan Karel disappeared from my radar. He became (after being a professor there) Dean of the relevant Faculty at Eindhoven. His friend—ARK—did even better and became a power in commercial-political Netherlands. Jan Karel married to AK and moved to Atlanta (USA) to take up an appropriate position at Georgia Tech. Suddenly, the director of CWI disappeared and Jan Karel became the new director. He celebrated this with decisive action.

One of the first things he did was installing a new Crypto group. To attract a new leader he made a complicated deal with the University of Leiden where his brother—HWLjr—was ensconced. The new leader in question was my former PhD student RC. To arrange things a secret consult was called. HMB, Jan Karel and myself went to dinner in an eminent hotel. There we ate an exquisite meal and talked of the things of the day and RC. Jan Karel was a true decider; only a little time later the group with its new leader was started.

For CWI one of the important items was the matter of a new building. Discussion about this had been going on for some time. The supervising office of NWO had earmarked a modest number of millions. Plans abounded. Jan Karel cut this Gordian knot and decided on an extension of the old building. Remarkably quick a triangular new part of the old building arose. Windows from floor-to-ceiling, transparency to the corridors, air conditioning, easy seats and glass “black”boards, printing stations, kitchens, a new large triangular atrium, and so on. The old building was renovated too, to go with the new part. Everything went remarkably quick, and the result was excellent, a tribute to decisive action.

Sometime later I got a stroke in Waterloo, Canada. I was transported home and convalesced in the appropriately named “Sun and Sea” in the coastal town of Wijk aan Zee. Interestingly, one could on one side enjoy the flames and smoke of the largest steel mill in the Netherlands together with the “Street of Steel”, on the other side the dunes, beach, and sea. Due to the strong winds it is a Mekka for paragliding and ultralight aviation. Anyway, there I spent my time in a wheelchair. My roommate received many people,

among whom Prince Constantijn. He was high up in the advertising business. Some people came to visit me. Jan Karel was one of them. Rather than being a decider, it was the empathic side that took over. He took time off from a busy schedule, travelled to a difficult-to-reach place, while he should be packing and preparing for his summer stay in the country side of Norway. To me it was an enjoyable visit and we could talk about my present condition, the future, things that came to mind, and old times.