

# Perils and Pearls

**In World War II, a Family's Story of Survival  
and Freedom from Japanese Jungle Prison Camps**



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*Rice paddy field on Island of Flores,  
photograph by Peter Neeb*

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and Freedom from Japanese Jungle Prison Camps  
by Hulda Bachman-Neeb

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Available for sale on Amazon.com

Published by



**BRISTLECONE PRESS**

Estes Park, Colorado

Editing: Jen Zelinger, TwinOwlsAuthors.com  
Book Design: Nick Zelinger, NZGraphics.com

ISBN: 978-0-578-56744-0 (Soft Cover)  
Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

For Jim, my husband

SAMPLE - FOR REVIEW ONLY

In memory of my mother, Oetie, who twice gave life  
to my brother Peter and me

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In memory of Grandmother Waldeck  
and  
Aunts Jette  
Kaethe  
Louise  
who nourished us

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For Peter, who shared the same fate,  
and his wife, Alja

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For the postwar generation:

My brothers

Robbert

Hans

My nieces and nephews and their families:

Laura Hulda, my godchild

Joelle Adrienne

Vanessa Oetie

Friso, my godson

Vincent

So they know

and honoring the courage of my late father,

Dr. Hendrik Neeb



*“How ludicrous and outlandish is astonishment  
at anything that happens in life.”*

~ Marcus Aurelius (121–180 AD)

*Meditations*

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# Introduction

A while back, I sat down with my mother to ask her about our time as World War II prisoners of Imperial Japan in the Pacific Rim. We are Dutch and spent three and a half years in a Japanese concentration camp. Before we began our session, I wanted to know if talking about these years would be too painful for her. She answered: “It’s all right; we need to talk. But not too long, please. We’ll do it in stages.”

Only she could clarify my memories, and as it was a subject not often mentioned in our house, which intuitively I knew to respect, I had been compiling a list of questions. My mother and I spent many hours recalling the camp years with a sense of relief that they were finally out in the open.

Ever after, my mother became less and less reluctant, and toward the end of her life, she would on occasion spontaneously recall the past, with or without emotion. It may have been a comfort for her, a kind of therapy, to find a good listener in me. After the war, all camp survivors, including my family, did their very best to bury the experience. We had our hopes and expectations for the future; we needed to come to the realization that loved ones, possessions, a carefree life, were lost forever. Unfortunately, not all were equally successful in subduing the traumas and demons and needed psycho-social assistance. Yet, the greater story is the revelation of the strength of the human spirit to transcend injuries and not become victimized by the past.

My own memories consist of a collection of incidents. They are fragmented since I was very young, but my mother’s formed a chain, and so she was my best source of information.

Both my brother Peter and I were born on the island of Flores in the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia, in the town of Endeh. I was born in 1939, Peter in 1941. The Japanese occupied Flores in May 1942. Since early 1942, Japan had invaded most of the nations in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. Other than imperial expansion, motivated by the scarcity of metals and petroleum, its scope was the creation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. In order to achieve this grandiose goal, Western influence needed to be banned from its freshly conquered Asian territories. Consequently, all non-Asian citizens were separated from the local population to facilitate the indoctrination into Japanese culture. The Italians and Germans were spared, a result of military and diplomatic treaties that bound Italy and Germany to Japan to form the Axis of Power. However, the Co-Prosperity Sphere slogan was no more than a propaganda line, as was proven by the brutal treatment of the captives throughout Asia.

At the time of our imprisonment in May 1942, my mother was twenty-five years old, I was two-and-a-half, my brother Peter not quite one year old. In March 1942, my father, a medical officer in the Netherlands Indies army, together with a handful of other officers, escaped Flores on a pearl schooner to join the Allies in Australia.

We were a large family in the Dutch East Indies; beginning in the mid-1800s we had come from Holland for careers and adventure. Some members of the clan had returned home over the course of time, but those who stayed in the Indies were all interned in camps that were erected everywhere in the archipelago.

My story is a slice of history about World War II in the Pacific and is also intended as a tribute to America and the American forces who gave us our freedom.

It has been seventy-five years since countless lives were disrupted or destroyed, both in Europe and in the Pacific realm. The world

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that had existed before 1940 was no more. In total, around sixty-five million people found death in World War II. The figures are not clear; several historians say eighty million people perished, but a figure of 2.5 percent of the world population emerges.

Today, the clouds of conflict continue to darken the skies. The loss of freedom is never far away, and that what was wrested from tyranny and oppression, we now take lightly—at our peril. What really are freedom and human rights? Our captors were under no compulsion to make allowances for us. If they did so, it was strictly by choice. They were not restrained by statutes.

A government which protects human freedom must be a government of law, not of man. Here and abroad, the caretaker of liberty can never rest. Most of us would agree that it is a task worth pursuing.

This book draws upon the recollections of family members, past and present, through interviews, letters, and diaries.

## Note

A clarification is in order as to how the Dutch use the terminology of Holland, Dutch, the Netherlands, the Netherlanders, and the Low Countries:

These indications are basically interchangeable.

“Dutch” is used as an adjective or to refer to the population.

The Dutch are also called “Netherlanders.”

“The Netherlands” is the geographical name, meaning “low countries.” Many parts of the country are below sea level, hence the designation: Low Countries.

“Holland,” today widely used, is a reference to one of the provinces which made up the Netherlands in the Dutch Golden Age, the seventeenth century, when Holland was the preeminent province with its commerce, fleet, and wealth.

Amsterdam is the capital city of the Netherlands.

The Hague is the seat of the government, courts, embassies, and the royal family.

## Photographs and Illustrations

- Nearly all the photographs, as well as the map of the Flores crossing, come from the family archives.

- The photographs of the camp and the guards are from the album *Geillustreerde Atlas van de Japanse Kampen in Nederlands-Indie, 1942-1945. Asia Minor, Purmerend, 2000. (Illustrated Atlas of the Japanese Camps in the Netherlands-Indies, 1942-1945.)*

- The map of the Zone of Captivity is drawn from the book *Prisoners of the Japanese* by Gavan Daws.

- The images of Prince Maurice, Jan Pieterszoon Coen, the VOC logo, and coins are from Google.

## The Dutch East Indies

*“Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has  
the courage to lose sight of the shore.”*

~ Christopher Columbus (1451–1506)

**D**uring the dry monsoon, the ocean shines brilliantly. It leaps onto the beach with foam cast up high and the fountain of purple and emerald crystals links the earth with the open sky. When the wet monsoon brings the rains, the sea loses its shine and the somber waves crash onto the shore to retreat again toward the horizon where, in the meantime, the sky has turned almost black.

The two seasons create the rhythm of the island. Under the bright sun of the dry monsoon, the shimmering leaves of the palm trees sway gently in the breeze. The local people reflect the motion as they amble along the shady side of the road, shuffling their light sandals. The lazy tempo is matched by the carts that roll by, pulled along by unhurried oxen, unperturbed by their coolie’s cries and whips to go faster. In the yards, chickens join in the rhythm, picking grains at their leisure, and ducks waddle around as if they have a purpose. Overhead, laundry billows on gently swinging clotheslines.

The scene changes when the wet monsoon sets in. Animals and house pets go into hiding, and the quiet rhythm is disturbed. People who need to be outdoors scurry through torrential downpours. Protection is often no more than a newspaper held above the head.

Sometimes large umbrellas of gaudy oilpaper, with their peculiar smell of wet resin, are carried off by the winds like giant butterflies. On the narrow roads, flooded most of the time, the ox carts rattle and splash, tended by their anxious handlers, who are aware they can lose their cargo any moment in a ditch concealed by red, muddy water.

Then, when the storms finally move out, the ocean and the trees rock gently back and forth, resting from the attack. Steam swirls up from the roads, and the air is filled with a heady mixture of scents from freshly watered flowers, wet grass, and unfortunately, the dank smell of mud.

A tropical climate has only two seasons, and temperatures range from 70 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit but can climb up to 90 degrees. The sun burns; the heat is scorching. The northwest monsoon is the wet season from December to March with heavy rainstorms and frequent floods; the southeast monsoon is dry and lasts from May until October. In the tropics the sun sets quickly, in less than fifteen minutes, and creates a brief explosion of brilliant orange and red colors. Flora is abundant from the typical frangipani flowering trees, the coconut palm groves, the multicolored cannas, and many other kinds of flowers, often heavily perfumed. Insects are equally abundant, as are lizards, snakes, and snails. The jungle needs year-round warm temperatures and high humidity for its large variety of trees that look alike, but the diversity of the species can amount to dozens per acre.

Flores, the island of my birth, is such a tropical place and is part of the Lesser Sunda Islands, as is Bali, to the east of Java in Indonesia. It is relatively small, with a surface of 5,000 square miles, a width of forty-one miles, and a length of 220 miles. Portuguese traders saw the island first in 1511 and named it Flores after its flowering tree, the flamboya, with its flaming red blooms and fern-like leaves. Today,



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the population is mostly Roman Catholic, a leftover of the Dominican missionaries who followed the traders. In 1846, the Dutch and Portuguese governments began negotiations, but it was not until 1854 that Flores became part of the Dutch East Indies. It has an amazing array of languages and customs on so small an island; a minimum of six dialects can be identified with some Malay in the mix, and the many villages have their own type of huts and compounds.



*Local hut, photograph by Peter Neeb*

The island is home to fourteen active volcanos, of which the best known is the 5,377-foot-high Kelimutu, thirty miles to the east of Ende. It has three volcanic crater lakes, each of a different color. These colors change several times a month, independently, owing to the fact that the lakes have their own specific connection to the activity of the volcano underneath. Even with its typical topography of a volcanic island, eruptions are rare and produce often no more than minor quakes.

In 1938, my parents traveled from Holland to Batavia on the island of Java, which was a return for my father and a new experience for

my mother. My father received his orders from the army to report to the island of Flores to take care of its small military barrack, a hospital, and a bunch of tropical diseases and sores.



*Local compound, photograph by Peter Neeb*

They made their home in Endeh on the south coast. The house was a comfortable bungalow. They had several servants, as was customary in this part of the world: the *kokki* (cook in Malay), the *djongos* (house boy) who swept and mopped, the *kebon* (gardener), and the *babu* (maid), who served as washerwoman and nanny. Their national attire, for both men and women, was the *sarong*, a cotton, batik cloth wrapped around the waist from the ankles up and a *kabaja*, a long-sleeved top that is white, colored, or patterned. As was the habit of the local population in the archipelago, they also chewed their *sirih*, the betel leaf, every day, all day long, which gave them red lips, a red mouth, and black teeth often ground to the gum. With its wonderful propensities of a mild euphoria or perhaps even of an aphrodisiac, these side effects were happily ignored.

Since the island had no electricity, we used kerosene for lighting and operating our Westinghouse refrigerator. The lamps were smelly,

with a hissing sound from the air pressure, and cast long shadows across the rooms with shrill, bright light. Every morning the *djongos* refilled all the lamps, clipped the wicks, and wiped the soot off the glass. When one of the volcanoes began to rumble and the grass started its eerie undulation, the servants would run out of the house in a panic, loudly calling out to the dung beetle that they hoped was hiding somewhere, "I am here; I am here." The beetle, they believe, carries the Earth between its legs, and if it is not aware of human presence, could drop the big ball any time into the dark unknown below.

When I was born in November 1939, the monsoon had not yet broken, a time of intense heat. My father returned from his usual round of the island in time to help with my birth. Also at hand were Sister Berneria and Sister Renalda of the neighboring hospital, with whom my mother had developed close friendships. As we owned the only refrigerator on the island, she met with the sisters every day when she brought ice cubes to the nunnery and the hospital. While my mother recovered, the servants ran the house, and before long, tea was served again on the verandah.

Sisters Berneria and Renalda, two more nuns, and the Mother Superior, all five of them trained nurses overseen by my father, ran the hospital with a local housekeeper. The order they belonged to was very strict; they were not supposed to speak except for one hour a day. Their multiple frocks caused an array of rashes in the tropical heat, which compelled my father to write to the Vatican to request that the nuns be allowed to remove a garment or two.

The mission was relatively large with a bishop and several priests who had a faint notion of medicine. Although they were not qualified to practice, some of the friars would leave their post on the local, sturdy ponies and often be gone for months at the time to preach and

heal. The nuns taught the local girls and women to sew and weave, also making efforts to school their pupils in the basics of housekeeping and hygiene.

My father, with two or three helpers, toured the island an average of eighteen days a month on horseback for longer stretches or by car when the clinics and the patients were closer to home. For the long stretch, he had extra provisions in his saddlebags and would know where to stay overnight in more or less comfortable lodgings. Although fighting heat and humidity, he rather enjoyed his tours around the island on the narrow trails and uneven paths through the dense jungle. He rode by ravines and waterfalls under a canopy of green leaves, past several volcanos with their colored lakes. He heard the calls of a variety of birds and was surrounded by the constant hum of insects. "It never ceases to feel like a pioneering experience," he used to say.

My father was in charge of the healthcare of the population, and one of his assignments was to fight the tropical ulcer frambesia or yaw, a disease, usually below the knee, also called jungle rot, that affects the skin, the bones, the cartilage. It is a bacterial infection starting as a circular swollen lesion from a cut or a scratch. If the patient is not treated, it causes disfigurement and severe disabilities. Frambesia will take months to heal, but once the patient is affected, it can be latent for up to fifteen years. It occurs in moist, tropical regions and is a highly contagious disease. My father must have received his own immunization, as he would clean the wounds and inoculate those individuals who had been exposed to infected patients. When bones and joints are affected, it becomes extremely painful, and if complications arise, like a thickening of the skin, walking becomes extraordinarily difficult, with the patient developing something like a crablike gait or what is called a crab yaw.

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*Clinic with family car*

The servants, the nuns, the small hospital, my father's tours, and his work at the hospital were part of our world, a safe world with a pleasant routine. The pay was usually in natura; grateful patients dropped off eggs or chickens or a basket of sweet-scented fruits.

Our house had the typical layout of a tropical bungalow.



*Endeh bungalow, 1938*

During the dry monsoon we used its large verandah more often than the rooms inside, it was a place where the sea breeze would

bring relief. My parents furnished it comfortably with rattan chairs, a table or two, and the unavoidable potted palm. The legs of each piece of furniture, both on the verandah and inside the house, stood in tins of soapy water to ward off the white ants. Lunch was usually served inside, where indispensable ceiling fans stirred the air. The kokki prepared either a European menu with potatoes and plain vegetables, according to my mother's instructions, or local dishes of rice, greens, meats, fish. This she did while squatting on the floor, surrounded by several odd, small charcoal burners, using a fan of dried leaves to keep the flames going. It was miraculous what she managed to produce every day with her primitive utensils. She never burnt anything, and the local dishes, with the many spices, their names too hard to remember, never failed to come to their full aromatic potential. After lunch followed the obligatory rest until tea time, which was family time or the occasion to receive visitors, of which there were usually rather few. The local custom dictated that friendly ties were only maintained with basically five families, the so-called upper class of the island, much to my mother's dismay. "That is elitist," she thought.

Before sunset, my father would check on his patients and afterward retire again to the verandah. Together with my mother, he would watch the fiery glow in the sky and the indigo contours of the mountainous volcanos in the background. By then, the *djongos* had lit the kerosene lamps, the crickets would chirp, the geckos would climb the walls, and a last cool drink was served before retiring.

The bedrooms surrounded the living room; it was an open floor plan. The beds were outfitted with mosquito nets and a so-called Dutch wife, a large tube-type pillow to use between the legs to minimize the effects of heat and sweat. On the gallery behind the dining area, we had a bathroom with a cement tub in its corner and a small bucket on the ledge we filled with water to use as a shower.

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Further down were the storage room where the supplies were kept, the kitchen, the washing room, the luggage room, and the garage, as well as the servant quarters. Occasionally, one or two of the servants would prefer to stay with the family rather than go home to their village after the day's work. My mother had breakfast served on the verandah in the relative cool of the early morning, and so the day could begin.



*My mother and Hulda, 1940*



*My father and Hulda, 1940*

For my father, the Dutch East Indies were familiar territory; for my mother, it was all new and a cultural shock. My father was born in 1912 in Muntok on Bangka, a small island off the east coast of Sumatra. He was a descendant of a prominent Dutch family that left Holland in the 1860s to follow the footsteps of those pioneers who had gone before, as early as the sixteenth century.

Europeans in Southeast Asia, among them the Dutch, came from nations of empire builders who were mainly in search of spices and lucrative business, at the same time looking for new sea routes and

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unknown territory. It was the age of explorers: James Cook opened the Pacific; Ferdinand Magellan was the first to circumnavigate the globe; Vasco da Gama sailed to Asia; the Dutchman Abel Tasman, in the service of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC (United Dutch East Indies Company), explored the oceans (Tasmania, off New Zealand, is named after him) and landed in the Indies, just to name a few of those intrepid navigators. Columbus had sailed earlier, in the fifteenth century.

They were also the first cartographers of maps that were much in need but virtually nonexistent at the time, shaping worldwide geographical knowledge. Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587-1629) established Batavia on the island of Java in 1619 as an officer of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, which was founded in 1602 by the States General at the instigation of the statesman Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547-1619).



*Johan van Oldenbarnevelt  
(17th century print)*

Even though he had his eye on the advancement of Dutch commerce, van Oldenbarnevelt's main purpose was to inflict losses



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on the Spanish and Portuguese competitors. The Dutch, traditionally able seafarers, began trade in the Far East in the seventeenth century. Since the merchant fleet had become by far the greatest in the world, van Oldenbarnevelt saw the potential of a Dutch international trading company gaining a dominant position in global business. Initially founded as a worldwide commercial enterprise, before long the States General bestowed on the VOC the instruments of war for the fight on the seas against the powerful Spanish empire and to push out the Portuguese and English.

The company could build its own forts and shipyards, have soldiers and fleets, wage war, and conclude treaties with foreign powers. The VOC became the very first multinational organization because it controlled, or owned even, production of goods in several countries while it minted its own coins. It wielded immense power for two hundred years. However, less successful management between 1720 and 1799 caused the unavoidable decline, and the company was dissolved in 1799. With its demise, its assets were taken by the government, and the VOC's territories became Dutch colonies.

Stadholder, or the chief magistrate, at the time was Prince Maurice of Orange (1567-1625, Maurits van Oranje, in Dutch). The relationship between the prince and van Oldenbarnevelt was a complicated one. The young prince had at first been the protégé of van Oldenbarnevelt, twenty years his senior, the seasoned statesman, counsel to the States General, de facto chief minister of Holland, and Secretary of State. When Maurice came more and more into his own, evolving into a military strategist and winning important field battles as a military organizer and innovator, he also began to show an interest



in politics and policies. As the latter had hitherto strictly been the domain of van Oldenbarnevelt, tensions between the two men began to rise, generating into a genuine competition.

As Maurice sought greater power for himself to steer the ship of state, he was looking for a subterfuge to eliminate van Oldenbarnevelt. He found it in a religious dispute. Since over several centuries, religion had been playing, and continued to play, an overwhelming political role in various nations, including the Low Countries, the prince used the opposing views within the Calvinist religion, the main denomination in the Netherlands, as his weapon. It was a conflict between the orthodox Calvinists, who saw themselves as the guardians of the true faith, and a less devout breed. The adversaries of van Oldenbarnevelt accused him of being a free-thinking Calvinist and of secretly sympathizing with the Catholic Church. The campaign of character assassination had begun.



*Prince Maurice of Orange*

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To discredit him, pamphlets were distributed labeling van Oldenbarnevelt as a stalwart Catholic, a perfidious sample of what today we would call “fake news.” The straightlaced clergy, by far the most powerful element in Holland, controlling both the church and the people, by now wanted to get rid of van Oldenbarnevelt as well. The prince saw his chance, and so, opportunistically, chose the side of the strict Calvinists. Consequently, van Oldenbarnevelt found himself automatically in the opposition, charged even with treason.



*Statue of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt*

Today, the power struggle between politics and religion is difficult for modern people to understand. But in that era, the pieces were in play for a deadly game of chess between these two eminent men of state, a game van Oldenbarnevelt ultimately lost. The prince had him arrested and secluded, his estate and inheritance were forfeited. The trial lasted eight months, during which time he was locked up in a small room in one of the buildings of Parliament. He was allowed to

retain his valet. May 13, 1619, was the day of the execution of this frail, seventy-one-year-old man, who mounted the scaffold supported by his faithful servant, asking for no more than his nightcap and a quick goodbye. He was decapitated in the courtyard of the Parliament buildings, and so, Maurice was delivered from his political opponent.

Van Oldenbarnevelt's widow was granted a meager pension. The execution remains highly controversial, a black page in the history of the Netherlands. To this day, books have been and are being written about this elder politician, his exploits, his statesmanship, his trial, and his sentence. His relationship with Prince Maurice of Orange has been a source of continuous analysis. Not until both Maurice and van Oldenbarnevelt were adequately rehabilitated was van Oldenbarnevelt rewarded with an imposing statue, situated across from Parliament in The Hague, for his forty-three years of unstinting loyalty and service to the country. May 13, 2019, marks the 400th year of his execution. To commemorate the event, new books and articles in newspapers and historical magazines celebrated Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. During numerous ceremonies in and around The Hague, he was portrayed as the greatest statesman the Netherlands has ever known.

Interestingly, van Oldenbarnevelt's name appears in my family tree, and at a solemn ceremony in 1954 when his statue was unveiled, the queen, several dignitaries, and my grandparents were honored guests. It is a peculiar coincidence that van Oldenbarnevelt, who was so significantly connected with the VOC that drew the Dutch, including my family, to the East Indies, figures among my ancestors.

The VOC traded throughout Asia, the Indies included. Jan Pieterszoon Coen, in its service, reaped many successes on his voyages. Because he had acquitted himself so admirably of his various commissions, in 1618, the directors of the VOC appointed him Governor General of the Dutch East Indies. With nineteen ships

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he stormed the coast of Java, laid siege to the harbor of Jayakarta, and immediately set out to secure a clove and nutmeg monopoly by fighting the British who owned the rights to the spices. The British finally withdrew. Next came the expulsion of the local forces, and when this was completed, Coen founded Batavia on the ashes of Jayakarta and declared it the capital. Batavia, today's Jakarta, became the central headquarters of the VOC in the Indies; Amsterdam was its seat in Holland.



*Jan Pieterszoon Coen*

It goes without saying that these conquests did not occur without plenty of cannonades and bloodshed, turning Coen into a controversial figure with the reputation of a ruthless warrior. Nevertheless, the colonies in the Indies continued to thrive, as did the other overseas possessions, and during the two centuries of the VOC's existence, they provided considerable fortunes and goods for the Dutch Republic. From this enormous wealth rose the Dutch Golden Age, the rich seventeenth century, with its incomparable art and architecture.

In Holland, the colonies were gaining in popularity as a result of the accounts of the returning seafarers, whose enthusiasm and

confidence in the Indies were a source of inspiration. Returning civil servants penned their memoirs or gave lectures, although not all of these were positive as voices would arise denouncing the Dutch presence as abusive colonialism. Yet, this could not put a damper on the excitement of a promising career in the exotic realms of the tropics, overseas prospects became more and more enticing. Consequently, in the early nineteenth century, the government established several educational facilities for the training of civil servants in the Dutch East Indies.

This is how my grandmother's father, Charles Rene Bakhuizen van den Brink (1850-1923), came to the Indies to forge a career for himself. His father had died when Charles Rene was young, and although Bakhuizen Sr. was an illustrious author and literary critic in the Netherlands, the means for a continued study for Charles Rene were short.

Upon the advice of well-meaning relatives and friends of his father's and under the spell of the many authors who had written positively about the colonies, he decided to prepare himself for the East Indies. He passed the obligatory exams, and so, as a newly minted civil servant, Charles Rene sailed for the colonies. He arrived in 1870 in Batavia, the seat of government, and received an appointment as a clerk at the Department of Finance, where he would remain for the next thirty years, ultimately becoming its director.

He went steadily up the ladder, not in the least because of his deep-seated interest in the culture and customs of the country and its people. He spoke Malay fluently and later in life was recognized for his devotion and knowledge with several honors and decorations. The Governor General then appointed him Resident of Batavia in 1901, a position he held until he returned to Holland in 1906.

The Resident was a highly placed government official. For the sake of an accessible control system, the East Indies were divided into

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three provinces that were again divided into *residenties* (departments); each of these departments could well be three times larger than the size of the Netherlands. West Java had five *residenties* of which Batavia was one of considerable importance.

The Resident, as the representative of the Governor General in his district and in his function as chief commissioner of police, was responsible for law and order in the area. A considerable part of his duties consisted of supervising the administrative machinery in his extensive department. This enabled Charles Rene, committed to traveling all over his sizeable territory, to satisfy his curiosity in regard to the way of life of the local inhabitants.



*Charles Rene Bakhuizen van den Brink and his wife Henriette*

In 1878, he married twenty-year-old Henriette Raedt van Oldenbarnevelt, born and raised in the East Indies. They had five children, one son and four daughters, of whom my father's mother was one, the eldest born in 1879.

Grandmother Louisa ("Loekie" for the family) and her four siblings were raised in all the comforts that came with their father's position. As director of the Department of Finance, Charles Rene had at his disposal a large house with the mandatory verandah and

its columns, surrounded by ample grounds. Several servants took care of the family and the property.



*Young Grandmama*

The official home after his appointment as Resident of Batavia offered even larger accommodations with wider verandahs, taller and additional white columns, and more potted plants. Every day, the grounds and the flowerbeds were tended by several prisoners and their guard from the nearby jail.

In the meantime, the East Indies had continued to modernize its cities; important irrigation systems were laid out, transportation arteries such as railways and canals, as well as an extensive network of roads, were engineered. Many research stations began experimenting in the field of mining, agriculture, fishing, forestry. Educational institutions flourished in vocational training or veterinary science. Elementary and high schools were established, as well as medical colleges, law schools, and technical institutes. For the development of the colonies, doctors, engineers, teachers, and scientists arrived in full force from the Netherlands.



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Their presence went hand-in-hand with a need for entertainment after the long days of strenuous work in the heat of the sun or in sultry department offices that, in turn, gave cultural life a big boost. Local performers created theater groups and musical evening events, sometimes with artists from the Netherlands; many libraries saw the light of day; clubhouses and pavilions with amply equipped liquor bars became favorite resorts, and sports like tennis and soccer thrived. Social life developed along the lines of the etiquette of the day, mysterious as its rules were regarding their origin. Visiting cards and courtesies calls were properly exchanged. Ladies and girls dressed elegantly, often in white muslin, the bodices of the dresses tightly adorned with ruffles at the wrist and neck, with skirts flowing. Men suffered the tropical temperatures in their suits with high, stiff shirt collars.



*Row of guests*

The lives of Charles Rene and Henriette, together with their children, went along the required paths of their comfortable station.

For Grandmother Loekie this changed radically when she married Grandfather Evert (Everardus Adrianus Neeb, 1869-1960), also born

## Perils and Pearls

and raised in the Dutch East Indies. The year of the wedding was 1899. My grandmother was eighteen years old, her husband ten years her senior.



*Wedding Grandmama and Grandpapa Neeb*

My grandfather's profession as a mining engineer took him to the tin mines of the island of Bangka, a remote place far from the civilization my grandmother had known and enjoyed. My grandfather was a severe man, ramrod and principled, my grandmother, young and vivacious, and at her eighteen years an ingenue. They settled in the main town, Muntok, and here, my grandmother's woes began.

She felt lonely, she was upset with her eventless life, and it did not take her long before she developed an overwhelming desire to leave

the island to go home to Batavia. She responded to her impulses and loaded a cart with a suitcase packed by her *babu* with some clothes and toiletry articles. She gathered pots and pans and large kettles with water. Once satisfied she had everything for her journey, she fetched a horse and, with deafening clanging of the ill-arranged cookware, she and the *babu* left the compound.

The *djongos* had run as fast as he could to find my grandfather to warn him, but my grandfather remained unfazed. He knew the island like the palm of his hand and quickly calculated that my grandmother would be home again at dinner time. Besides, he also knew that she was afraid of the dark, and especially of darkness in a jungle with its creepy noises of the night.

Indeed, my grandmother did return at dusk, and not a word about her little excursion was spoken at the dinner table. Yet somehow, she had the fixed notion that she had taken the wrong route, the distressed *babu* useless as a guide, and that somewhere out there was the path that would take her off the island. She had no idea how to return to Batavia, but her foremost desire was to get away. And so, she set out on her journey once or twice more, always home again at the dinner hour.

In time, she adjusted to the slow pace of the island; she had no choice, and learned to accept its inconveniences and hardships. Then the children were born, first Evert in 1900, followed by Louise (“Dee”) in 1902, and ten years later came Hendrik (“Henk”), my father, in 1912. Although his base was Muntok, my grandfather often traveled around the archipelago, with or without my grandmother and his family, to take stock of mineral resources. Occasionally, he needed to go to China to recruit laborers for the tin mines. Once, his travels took him to Siam, today’s Thailand, on a gold expedition. As a tourist, he visited Tibet, where he picked up several souvenirs, silk, jade, and a smattering of yoga.

## Perils and Pearls



*Family in Muntok*

Grandfather Evert Neeb was a scion of a family with roots in Leyden that had won its spurs as surgeons. A certain Johan Philippus Neeb (1767-1840) served as the official surgeon of the town, as did his son Jan Frederik (1797-1873). The trend continued, with this difference that the following generations enlisted as officers of health in the Dutch East Indies Army. Grandfather Evert's father, Pieter (1830-1902), a physician, was the first to relocate to the Indies while enlisting in the army. He was married twice, losing his first wife and two children at a young age during a cholera epidemic. One son survived, Christiaan. With his second wife, Pieter had nine children. His career must have gone well since he was the recipient of multiple decorations from the Netherlands Government.

Christiaan (1860-1924), another physician in the family as well as an army officer of health, proved to be very musically inclined. He had a grand piano shipped to him from Holland, which required fortifications of his home with extra foundation and piling. In his spare time, he composed; one of his songs in honor of his Leyden

fraternity is still performed today. His appointment as army photographer resulted in an album that is archived in the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam. He had a daughter, Annie, who perished in one of the Japanese concentration camps.

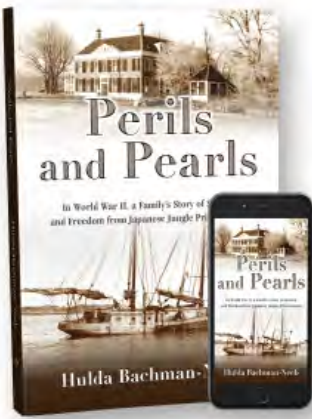
Henri (1870-1933) was one of the sons of Pieter's second marriage, one more physician, one more army officer of health, one more family member with an impressive career who was highly decorated. The appointed inspector general of the Dutch East Indies Army's Health Department, he became a professor at the Technical High School in Bandung, which later became the first established university in the Indies. The army officially appointed Henri also its photographer, and a collection of his photographs is archived at the University of Leyden as well as at the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, like his brother Christiaan's.

Grandfather Evert, another son among the nine children of Pieter's second marriage, broke the chain by studying mining at the Technical University in Delft and worked as the Head engineer of the Bangka-Billiton Tin Company that later became a subsidiary of Shell.

Mine engineers in the tropics retire at the age of fifty-five, and when the year 1924 came around, it was time for the family to relocate to the Netherlands. Since Bangka did not provide the best schooling, the two older children, Evert and Dee, had gone ahead to Holland to live with their grandparents, Bakhuizen van den Brink, who had left Batavia in 1906 upon the completion of Charles Rene's duties as Resident. My father, as a twelve-year-old boy, came with his parents to The Hague to finish his schooling. Faithful to tradition, he enrolled at the University of Leyden to study medicine; his ancestors, his grandfather, his uncles had all been students of this illustrious institution.

## Perils and Pearls

For my father and his parents, the change from the sweltering tropics, the verdant scenery and the variety of flora and fauna, to the mild maritime world of the Netherlands required major adjustments, in both climate and living patterns. Still, regardless of how well they adapted, their yearning for the tropics remained undiminished.



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