

# Introduction

I am the family face;  
Flesh perishes, I live on.

—*Thomas Hardy*

As soon as the leaves were forming piles in the woods and the wind and rain left marks on the windowpanes, my mother would take me to my grandfather's grave in Bloemendaal, the Netherlands. I never knew my grandfather, Jacques Francken. In the black-and-white picture that sat on my mother's antique desk, he was a bald man with a stern expression on his face, and I felt no curiosity whatsoever about this paterfamilias.

At the graveyard, I would wade through piles of leaves. I remember enjoying the earthy smell that came from the wet and rotting leaves, dead branches, and black soil. It was the smell that went into new life, a life that was oblivious of everything that went before it. Like the dead leaves, my dead grandfather and our shared family history were too much things of the past, and I was too busy growing up.

When I was small, I was dwarfed by the big headstone of my grandfather's grave. As I grew up and learned to read, I tried to decipher the eroded letters on my grandfather's enormous, mossy tombstone. When I was about eleven years old, I noticed my grandfather's unusual place of birth for the first time: it was not Amsterdam, Rotterdam, or The Hague but Jombang. Jombang is in Java, but no one in my family ever talked about Java or Indonesia. It was a hidden past and, as I found out much later, taboo even to remember. Bad things had happened, people had suffered, the family had lost something it could never recover . . . and so it was better to be silent and move on.

When I started asking my mother about my grandfather's colonial past, I met with resistance and denial: "Why do you want to know? My father never talked about it . . . I know very little" and "None of us talked about those Indies dealings, it was like a closed chapter, a finished book that you put away and never bothered to open again."

But once I was older and had children of my own, I wanted to know more. The fact that the whole subject seemed shrouded in silence made me all the more curious. Was this a family cover-up, a conspiracy of silence or, at its most innocent, a muted agreement to pay no attention to the subject so it might fade away and be forgotten over time?

I have come to see this denial on my family's part as a form of self-censorship, which to some extent plays out in Dutch society as well. The average Dutch person will be able to tell you all about the Second World War, the German occupation, the Holocaust, Anne Frank, and the hunger winter of 1945, but when you ask him when the Dutch East Indies were liberated, what exactly happened during the police actions, and when Indonesia gained independence, that person may well draw a blank.<sup>1</sup>

Colonial history is no longer a standard part of the Dutch school curriculum, and yet most everyone is familiar with the greatest Dutch novel, *Max Havelaar* (1860), by Multatuli. This book, which exposed the exploitative cultivation system of the colonial class and the corruption of the Javanese aristocracy, has left such a mark on the Dutch psyche that the consensus seems to be that most everything the Dutch did in Indonesia was evil, coercive, and politically incorrect.

The climax of the story I am about to tell occurred at the height of the Indonesian Revolution in 1945, yet the event is difficult to retrace in Dutch and Indonesian history books. English-language sources describe this story, but Dutch sources scarcely mention it.<sup>2</sup>

When my great-aunt, Fré Francken, was one of the first war widows to return from the Indies in January of 1946, she sat down in my grandparents' living room and said, "I'm going to tell you my story, but I will tell it to you only once."

While my grandmother was pouring tea, Fré told a troubling story that she would repeat only twice, shortly before her death, to an aunt and to a close friend. But since she first told the story in 1946, there have been mostly whispers and rumors that gradually vanished as Fré and my grandparents' generation died.

There were gaps in Fré's tale, some of which I have managed to fill by writing this book. In short the story is this: Fré was married to

Peddy, the youngest brother of my grandfather Jacques. In the 1930s Peddy and Fré were running Kali Jompo, the Francken coffee and rubber estate in the eastern part of Java, outside of Jember. They had two daughters, Willy and Joke, and one son, Harry.

When the Japanese invaded Java in 1942, Peddy was arrested by Japanese troops, interned separately from his family, and finally imprisoned. Fré and her children were interned soon thereafter but survived Banyubiru, one of the worst camps in Central Java. After the Allied liberation in August of 1945, they found out that Peddy had died in Bandung on March 15, 1945. They did not know and would never know anything about the circumstances of his death or where he was buried.

In October 1945, Fré and her three children were evacuated to the eastern port of Surabaya. During another evacuation within Surabaya (which, due to bad timing and bad luck, coincided with the Indonesian Revolution), Fré's transport was attacked by Indonesian independence fighters and her two daughters were killed. Harry was injured but survived.

Fré and Harry never talked to each other about the transport again; they were classic cases of severe posttraumatic stress disorder. The critical reader might think this is a typical (albeit tragic) story that happens in wars and revolutions. What is atypical about it is that neither Indonesian nor Dutch historians have given it the kind of weight it deserves. The extreme forms of violence against non-Indonesians (besides the Dutch and other Europeans, the Chinese, the Japanese, Eurasians, and the Arab population in Java were just as much a target) have not been properly documented, as there has been a tendency to downplay or ignore the excesses as being largely committed in the name of a good cause, Indonesian independence.

What needs to be highlighted here is that unlike the misinformed and misguided Dutch government of the time, many Dutch colonials, like my great-aunt Fré, had come to see the Indies as a lost cause. They were determined to leave anyway, and thus were no threat to the independence of the emerging Indonesian Republic.

This book is not an attempt to vilify Indonesian independence fighters or to diminish the importance of the revolution. On the contrary,

the fact that Harry's sisters were killed by Indonesians but that Harry himself was saved by one shows rather pertinently that times of war and revolution are never black and white or fights between pure good and pure evil—it is the gray area that reveals elements of salvation that we need to cling to and share in order to carry on with dignity and respect.

Nonetheless, because the violence of these events has not been fully acknowledged, I have felt compelled to write this book and give the violence a face, rather than allow it to be a statistic that does not bleed. The exploitation and hardships of nameless Javanese peasants in Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* do not have the desired effect on the reader until the author inserts the moving story of Saïdjah and Adinda. Willy and Joke are the Dutch Saïdjah and Adinda and although this is a provocative statement to make, I believe provocation is sometimes necessary in order to be heard and thus have this story gain its place in Dutch colonial history.<sup>3</sup>

As for the documentation of the violence during the revolution, one of my Chinese Indonesian students urged me to tell my family's story here, for in more recent outbreaks of Indonesian violence, especially against the Chinese population, identical atrocities have been committed. Freek Colombijn commended historian William Frederick for showing “that rogue violence during the Indonesian Revolution (1945–1949) was not merely tolerated, but probably consciously exploited by the military and political leaders of the Indonesian Republic. The use of violence as a legitimate means to solve problems was thus already institutionalized at the birth of the independent Indonesian state.”<sup>4</sup> My book can serve as a reminder that a diligent documentation of these incidents can bring both perspective and healing. Even before publication, this manuscript has worked as a salve for the wounds in my own family. It came more than sixty years too late, but it is healing nonetheless.

Because the last generation of Dutch children who grew up in the Indonesian archipelago is now beginning to share its stories with relatives and friends, I should say something about how I compiled this family memoir, as a guideline for people who want to lay down their

own family histories. Because family archives and documents regarding my forebears' times in the Indies had been lost in the war, I was confronted with huge gaps in the narrative. I was afraid that I had come too late and my grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations had taken all the information with them into their graves. Thus in my imagination and dreams, my grandfather's tombstone became a high, impenetrable wall.

My first "living archive" consisted of my relatives in my mother's generation, the cousins of Willy and Joke, who were the nieces and nephews of my grandfather, Fré and Peddy. Through interviews I did in the Netherlands with several of them, and thanks to the ease with which one can communicate via e-mail these days, I gathered little bits of information, memories, and sometimes actual breakthroughs in stories where I thought I had nothing but loose ends. Apart from interviewing, it is important to go back to the interviewees and verify information as well as ask new questions. Revisiting the information and mulling over the bits and pieces is an exercise well worth the effort in resurrecting and framing the story.

But it was a difficult process, and there was too much missing information. One of my biggest challenges was a geographic one. I live in California, and in order to write a story about colonial times in the Indies, the two best places to be are Indonesia and the Netherlands. I could combine my research in the Netherlands with family visits. But while I was yearning to go to Java and see some of the places, smell the air, and visit the archives, I was skeptical whether the family story could be reconstructed in full, even if I went there in person. To make up for this, I relied on novelists and journalists who were contemporaries of my great-grandparents and grandparents. How did they write about the stifling heat, the mold-forming humidity, the extraordinary food, the strange but intriguing superstitions of the Indonesians, and the many exoticisms of their surroundings? E. M. Beekman has argued that this kind of literature "will always remain an important part of the total colonial experience" as it is first-hand experience rather than the second-hand reflection of historical analysis.<sup>5</sup> Colonial texts are some of the more interesting Dutch texts on record, exactly

because they are so far removed from life in the polder and on the farm. Much of this literature has not been translated into English until now, and I hope my translations will make this book all the more interesting for an English-speaking audience.

Although my knowledge of Malay vocabulary has significantly increased during the writing of this book, I cannot speak or read Indonesian, and therefore Indonesian sources and experiences have been completely closed off to me. No doubt this has given the book a Eurocentric bias, and regrettably, it has been impossible for me to penetrate and represent the Indonesian side of this story in full. The only opportunity I have had to mitigate this is through my contact with Indonesian students in Southeast Asian Studies who came to me to learn Dutch.

Access to the archives in the Netherlands, such as Nationaal Archief and Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague and Koninklijk Instituut van de Tropen and Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie in Amsterdam, is not straightforward.<sup>6</sup> Access to some of the Indies archives relating to the war is restricted, and permission to see them needs to be obtained in writing. The Netherlands does not have a Freedom of Information Act but does have an *Archiefwet* (Archive Law) since 1995. Besides unrestricted-access archives, there are A-archives (restricted access) and B-archives (very restricted access). The term for opening these archives to the public is seventy-five years.

In a 2000 report, a government official, R. van der Ploeg, charged that the archives had too few means (financial, technical, and staff) to present material to the public and online. As a result, too many archives are not used in their proper capacity.<sup>7</sup> While large public archives like NIOD and NA have finally digitized a list of their collections, in order to browse the collections themselves, one has to travel there in person and request the material for perusal in the various reading rooms. For the A and B archives permission is required in advance, so it is wise to ask for and obtain permission before traveling to Amsterdam and The Hague.

While many people after the war were notified about a death in the family by the Red Cross, due to the chaos in Java after the liberation

and the difficulties of collecting and disseminating information, there were many others who did not even get that notification and thus may have been kept in limbo for the rest of their lives. Still others, like my great-aunt Fré, received a date and place of death and a formal letter from Queen Wilhelmina, but no further details at all. One needs to know this kind of specific information to recover from trauma. I advise the reader who wants to do a similar search to be prepared before contacting and/or making the trip to the archives, as my experience with the archives was frustrating.

As a literary historian and biographer I have tried to write a biography of a place, our family estate, Kali Jompo (1884–1957), and the members of my family who lived there. My Indies relatives finally spiraled down from being colonizers to being colonized by the Japanese. They ended up as exiles in the Netherlands, a country that has never fully acknowledged their contribution, their status, or their suffering. This is their story, but in the telling, it has become mine as well.