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Chapter 1

THE DUTCH EAST INDIES

It is a fact that it takes experience before one can realize what is a catastrophe and what is not. Children have little faculty of distinguishing between disaster and the ordinary course of their lives.

—Robert Hughes, *A High Wind in Jamaica*

Children see and hear what is there; adults see and hear what they are expected to and mainly remember what they think they ought to remember.

—David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*

I was born and grew up before, during, and right after the Pacific War in the Dutch East Indies, a colony of the Netherlands, and I can’t imagine being born under luckier stars. I was a *totok*, a child born in the Indies of European parents. Colonial society was my everyday environment.

My life took place at school, in the yard, on the street, and around the so-called outbuildings where the *gudangs*, the storage rooms, were, and where the servants lived with their families. I would play between the stalls and baskets in the marketplace, the *pasar*, and during school vacations I’d roam around the green mountainsides of the Preanger region with its tea plantations. My daily surroundings were full of sounds: human voices, the dull snorting of water
buffalo, the tinkling of the little bells on the small carriage horses, birds singing, insects buzzing, and the quacking of a raft of ducks, while somewhere around there was always a rooster crowing. When I watch a TV broadcast about Indonesia, I’m always expecting a cock’s call in the distance. And it’s always there; you can bet your life on it.

There were smells. The smell of people and animals, the mucky odor of the brown river water, the scent of piles of papayas and mangoes in the market, the rotting smell of trasi, a shrimp paste that every native inhabitant of the country is wild about, the sweetish sugarcane aroma of gula jawa, which is prepared in bamboo tubes and always contains small twigs and cockroaches that fall in during the cooking. And above all, the omnipresent odor everywhere, the mixture of manure, decaying fruit, and smoldering smoke, an aroma that even today hangs suspended in the small cities and the desas, the villages, and that fills you with bittersweet joy each time you smell it, no matter what your age.

I had contact with the people of the land every day: Sundanese and Javanese and, as they were officially referred to, “Foreign Asians”: Hindus from British India, Chinese, Iraqis (who were actually Mesopotamian Jews), and Arabs from Yemen and Hadramaut. They dressed and behaved differently, and they lived in a world of which I really had no clue. They spoke languages I didn’t understand, but everyone made do with market Malay, myself included.

As a child I had no concept of what a colonial society stood for. I felt at home in this country and among its population with the authenticity of someone born there. I knew no better. Much later on, looking back at that time, I would think on occasion: What were we actually doing there? By what right were the Dutch there? Weren’t we merely foreigners who were neglecting the population and basically exploiting the land for our own profit? In 1940 in all of the Dutch East Indies, as I now know, there were 221 Indonesian physicians and 230 academics out of a population of sixty million. That is nothing to be proud of. But on a personal level I don’t feel guilty about it. It is history; it is just the way things were.
I’m not inclined to apologize to the Indonesians for what happened during the colonial era. Besides, they aren’t asking for any apologies. By the same token, I don’t feel the need to have the Japanese apologize to me for what happened in the Pacific War. Some of my ex-companions in adversity have been whining about that for decades and will probably continue to do so.

As a child I never really saw any Indonesian businesspeople, teachers, doctors, or intellectuals. They didn’t come to our house. I didn’t know they existed.

From November 1939 onward, my father was the aide-de-camp of Governor-General Tjarda van Starkenborgh Stachouwer. Because of my father’s position he and my mother were obliged to attend many audiences and official functions. At one of these my mother met the wife of an indigenous regent. She came from the upper Javanese priyayi aristocracy and, as my mother ironically commented, spoke a more polished Dutch than many Europeans in the colony. The two women became friends, insofar as circumstances allowed. They never visited each other, presumably because the Indonesian woman didn’t consider it proper: my parents weren’t chic enough.

In this book I recount my youth in the Dutch East Indies from 1933 to 1946. I have many childhood memories, memories of my life as a boy in Japanese internment camps and of the first few months after the liberation.

The events are almost photographically imprinted in my mind. And I still know very clearly what my thoughts were when I saw something happen, or when I heard or experienced something.

My story is not being told by a victim.

My colonial youth and the Pacific War have shaped me profoundly. For me this confusing and unforgettable time is a privilege that fate—or chance—simply dropped into my lap.

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1. The governor-general was the representative of the Queen of the Netherlands in the Dutch East Indies.
Rain would fall in the afternoon. First it would grow dark with heavy, low-hanging clouds. Everything grew silent, and then you’d hear the rustling of the rain’s arrival. When the first drops hit the dusty ground, a heavy smell of soil arose from the earth, lasting only a few seconds. Shortly thereafter, the water would pelt and rattle on the shingles of the roofs and on the gravel, and gurgle through the drains and gutters. Just above the ground a slight mist of splashing drops would form. Every once in a while we were allowed to play in the rain. Naked and whooping, we’d then jump around in the abundant water falling straight down from the sky. The servants’ children stood in the doorway of their quarters and watched us in amazement. Who would be crazy enough to run around in the rain! It undoubtedly reinforced their own and their parents’ conviction that the belandas—the Dutch—had a screw loose.

In the evenings in the rainy season a thick cloud of larons, flying ants, would sometimes come plummeting down abruptly around the lamps. The humidity was causing the larvae to come out by the thousands from their eggs in the ground. They were gross and fat and whitish with transparent wings. It was the light of the floor lamp on the terrace that attracted them. They’d hit against the hot lamp and then fall thrashing to the ground. The servants caught them in a wajan, a large round iron pan we know as a wok, and fry them in their own fat. They considered it a delicacy.

Later the frogs would come to life again, croaking loudly into the night. Sometimes they’d suddenly fall silent all at the same time
as if they were being directed by a mysterious conductor. Tucked away safely beneath your mosquito net, you’d listen to them.

At that moment the street vendors with their foodstuffs came by the homes. They had many customers in the European neighborhoods, too, because their merchandise was cheap and very tasty. You’d hear the recurrent, grinding squeak of the carrying pole they used to transport their wares. With a pounding heart you’d wait for their long-drawn-out melancholy call with which they recommended their dishes. The sound could fill you with a nameless shiver. And then the small oil lamp’s flickering flame would throw a ghostly pattern of light and shadow across the window as you lay trembling in your bed.

We were living in Surabaya; it was 1939, and I was six years old. My father was supply corps officer of the KNIL. He was responsible for the purchase of everything the army needed, from rice to clothing, from hardware to textiles, from footwear to soap.

He received the suppliers at his office in the tangsi, the barracks. They were always Chinese wholesalers, often accompanied by a nattily dressed young assistant, whose job it was to take notes in a little book or work out estimates on an abacus worn glossy from wear and tear.

At New Year’s and other celebrations these suppliers had gifts delivered to our home, such as fireworks, trinkets, delicacies, or a little basket with birds’ nests. My father would only accept small gifts, for in this society bribery was a frequently employed practice. When he was promoted to the rank of major, a magnificently adorned and lusciously prepared suckling pig was delivered to our house that very same evening. It was presented on an enormous, precious silver platter decorated with many artfully engraved ringlets and rosettes. The little animal had been arranged wholly intact on a bed of vegetables and fruit. What especially fascinated me was the pineapple he was holding in his snout. We ate the piglet with relish to the barely concealed disgust of the servants who, like most Javanese, were Muslim.

2. KNIL: Royal Netherlands East Indies Army.
The next day my father sent the *jongos*, the houseboy, to the downtown office of the Chinese to return the gigantic platter. Still clutching it in his arms, he came back an hour later with the message: “The *Cina* says there’s a misunderstanding, *Tuan,*” he said with lowered eyes, trying to shove the platter into my father’s hands. But my father knew all too well what he could open himself up for with gifts such as these. “Once I get involved this way there’ll be no end to it,” he said; “it should stop with something insignificant.” That same platter went back and forth a few more times before the Chinese man gave up.

My father was a devoted equestrian. Next to the outbuildings behind the house was a stable with two horses. They were cared for by a *spandri*; this was a soldier close to retirement age who would be put into service for small chores. I liked going into the stable. It smelled nice, and the old man would be quietly busying himself with the
animals, to which he talked uninterruptedly while the bats would swoosh high up in the beams. I’d sit on a little bench and watch him, the odor of the horses’ fresh sweat, urine, and leather all around me.

My father rode every morning, no matter how late it might have been the night before. In the early dawn the stableboy was waiting for him next to the house, holding the reins of a horse restlessly shaking his head, scraping the pavement stones with his hooves.

After the ride the horse was wet with sweat, and his bit would be foaming. Sometimes his flank showed lashes from which drops of blood were welling up. He had been insubordinate during the jumps, and it was no use going up against my father, a rigid man, with that kind of behavior.

On 30 August 1939, the house was filled with flowers, and on the terrace the champagne corks were popping. My father had been named to the position of aide-de-camp to Governor-General Tjarda van Starkenborgh Stachouwer. A few weeks later we moved to Buitenzorg.