Camp Life Is Paradise for Freddy
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Introduction

In its original 2007 Dutch edition, this book did not require an introduction. Fred Lanzing’s compact but powerful memoir of his boyhood in colonial Java, including several years in internment camps during the Japanese occupation, covers territory with which most Dutch readers were at least vaguely acquainted. The memoir begins with a charming and recognizable evocation of *tempo dulu* (“the good old [colonial] days”) from a child’s perspective but quickly introduces unconventional, even startling, views about what the war and especially the internment camps of the Japanese occupation were actually like. In a concise Afterword the author attempts to explain his outlook and intentions, lest there be any doubt about them. Most Dutch readers, whether or not they agreed with, appreciated, or were willing even to consider Lanzing’s challenging conclusions, were at least still on more or less familiar ground.

To readers outside the Netherlands and what might be called the Dutch diaspora, however, the same circumstances do not necessarily obtain, and for this English-language edition some additional background and commentary may be welcome.

Today, three generations after the end of World War II in Southeast Asia (the Pacific War), most of the former Western colonial powers hold respectful but much-faded memories of the civilians who were interned there by Japanese occupation forces. A recent scholarly survey calls them “forgotten captives,” and similar language is found in much of the fairly limited academic, journalistic, and autobiographical work that has appeared over the years. Public interest has been, and remains, on military affairs (including military POWs) and the general fate of the colonies, including the
connections between Japanese rule and the rise of local independence movements. And in any case, the war in Southeast Asia remains today vastly overshadowed in Western public eyes by events and people in the war as it played out in Europe.

A partial and important exception to this pattern is the Netherlands. There, although the European war and the German occupation that accompanied it clearly receive the bulk of public interest, the Pacific War in the then colonial Netherlands East Indies has, despite periodic complaints to the contrary from some quarters, continued to receive significant attention. A major reason for this difference from the rest of Europe has to do with numbers. In the Netherlands East Indies, about 105,000 Dutch civilians were interned by the Japanese—more than two-thirds were women and children. By comparison, there were roughly 8,000 American internees in the Philippines, 4,000 British in Malaya, and fewer than 200 British and French in Burma and Indochina, respectively. Most of the surviving Dutch civilian internees returned or emigrated to the Netherlands at the end of the war, and they were later joined by an additional 200,000 or more Dutch subjects (a majority of whom were Eurasians), who, though mostly not interned, were badly treated by Japanese policies and wartime conditions, and then targeted in the turbulence that came in the wake of the Pacific War, the Indonesian drive for independence. Together these groups, and eventually their children and grandchildren, make up a significant portion of the Dutch population, more than 3 percent in 2010.

Numbers alone do not tell the entire story, however. From the very beginning of this emigration, disputes arose over issues such as the manner in which the émigrés were received in the Netherlands (many felt it chilly, if not hostile, with little support), the extent to which their experiences were comparable to those of the Dutch in the German-occupied Netherlands, and whether they should be entitled to financial compensation (from whatever source) for property losses, back pay for those who had served in the colonial administration or military, and physical as well as mental suffering. Debate over these and related questions, which was muted at
first, became more pronounced at the end of the 1960s, when discussion of what came to be called the “Indies Question” (Indische Kwestie) became more open. At the same time it became entangled with other public debates such as those over the role of the military in the Dutch-Indonesian war (“decolonization”) (1945–49) and questions about memorializing World War II (in both Europe and Asia); these in turn were intensified in one way or another by society-wide pressures such as growing ethnic diversity and rising expectations for the government’s welfare responsibility. The resulting polemical knot came to be referred to as the nation’s onverwerkte (“unprocessed” but also “unassimilated” or “unaccepted”) colonial past and took on the characteristics of nothing less than a struggle to redefine the Dutch national identity, a struggle that persists today.

At or very near the heart of all this smoldered—and smolders still, seventy years later—the fundamental question of what the wartime experience of the colonial Dutch had actually been like under the Japanese. This is a far more difficult question to answer than might be imagined, especially since “objective” documentation is almost entirely lacking. Whatever historical understanding can be reached must be founded largely on personal sources: diaries (including drawings made at the time), memoirs and interviews written down much later, and literary evocations. Modern historians are well acquainted with the problems of using such sources, which are in this instance compounded by the fact that of roughly 92,000 survivors only at most 1 in 100 (and perhaps considerably fewer) left even short written or recorded accounts. There was from the start a range of views, but the result was an increasingly lopsided public memory war. By the early 1970s the dominant popular understanding, among both the general public in the Netherlands and, apparently, survivors themselves, was that internment under the Japanese had been fully as horrific as the experiences they associated with wartime in the Netherlands, perhaps even worse. It had been, according to this picture, uniformly hellish: three and one half years of extreme deprivation.
(especially starvation), characterized by extreme violence and all the tools of violence in the hands of diabolical Japanese intent on exterminating Westerners; the experience had been severe enough to scar victims, especially children, irreparably. A few former internees pushed back against this perspective, which they saw as the product of blatant and often dishonest exaggeration, describing it as full of inaccuracies and outright fabrications. The most prominent of these critics was the writer Rudy Kousbroek (1929–2010), who published the first of many pieces (though not a memoir) on the subject as early as 1971 and who coined the term East Indies Camp Syndrome (Oostindisch Kampsyndroom) to describe what he believed was a kind of hysterical need to sensationalize—indeed lie about—the Indies wartime experience.

Lanzing’s 2007 memoir is the most polished and important of his several contributions to this long-running polemic. Its origins lie in the understated and thoughtful collection of “autobiographical notes,” carefully worded and copiously footnoted, that Lanzing published in 1980 in a prominent Dutch journal of letters. Lanzing argued that his own experience as a young boy in wartime Java had not in fact been traumatic and had little in common with the dominant popular view. Far from it. From what he had perceived through a child’s eyes, he understood that rather than unrelieved hell, life varied a great deal from camp to camp and from one period to another; even the food situation and hunger levels ranged widely, and in any case were not, until the last months of the occupation, nearly as dire as widely depicted; discomforts, overcrowding, and poor hygienic conditions were undeniable, but many of the problems of camp life were caused or exacerbated by the Dutch camp leaders and internees themselves. As for the Japanese, they were seldom seen and in any case did not appear to have been guilty of the innate cruelty and barbaric behavior commonly reported and believed. Indeed, Lanzing went out of his way to show that in his personal experience even Sone Kenichi, perhaps the most notorious of all Japanese internment officers (executed in 1946 as a war criminal), had displayed shades of empathy and humanity. It
had not always been an easy time, Lanzing concluded, but it had paradoxically afforded him great freedoms (“no school, no shoes, no parents”), a certain amount of excitement and adventure, an unusual coming of age that, in retrospect, was an integral part of the colonial childhood that he felt it a privilege to have experienced. The same points are made in the 2007 memoir, but in the framework of a broader, richer, and more chronological narrative, from which the author draws more pointedly critical conclusions.

Both works have attracted hostility. Lanzing has been labeled, among other things, an implicit collaborator (“pro-Jap”), an enemy of national and social solidarity, a person with anticolonial sentiments (as a bad quality), and a disturbed person suffering from “Jap-camp-child syndrome” who is “stuck in pre-puberty characterized by egocentrism.” Reviewers have suggested that his work ignores or trivializes the suffering of others, is merely an outdated and vague gesture rather than anything substantive, flies in the face of the demonstrated real-life experiences of thousands of children and adults who were interned, or—perhaps as devastating in its own way as any other criticism—amounts to nothing more than a “silly book.” (A few, to be fair, found the memoir vaguely “compelling,” or “interesting,” for details not found anywhere else in the literature.) The more extreme reactions are obviously highly emotionally charged, and the rest often appear to ignore or misunderstand precisely what Lanzing is or is not saying. But their nature is serious enough, and Lanzing’s mission to correct the record important enough, that they deserve at least brief comment here.

A prime set of concerns has to do with historical accuracy. Memoirs are not history, of course, nor memory truth, and certainly the idea (from which Lanzing draws much inspiration) that the child’s view of things, being presumably free of adult preconceptions and expectations, reflects a more authentic memory, may be more literary than historical and is in any case open to serious question. Nevertheless, it must be said that from a historian’s perspective the picture of Dutch internment presented in Lanzing’s memoir is in fact considerably closer to that of careful scholarly
assessment than is the dominant popular version, especially that found in literature and the cinema. He is certainly correct to highlight the variability of conditions according to time, place, and individual circumstances, for example, particularly where the infamous Cideng camp—invariably considered representative, which it emphatically was not—is concerned. (In Java alone there were initially over one hundred different camps, later consolidated to about thirty.) And his account of the Japanese presence, actions, and intentions in the camps is not out of line with most even-handed research on the subject going back as far as Van Velden’s classic 1963 work on the internments. Few serious scholars of the Japanese occupation today would have any basic quarrels with Lanzing’s 1985 generalization, of which the memoir is intended to provide an illustration, that

the clichéd image of cruel “Japs,” with constant rapes, deliberate liquidations of Europeans, and three straight years of hunger, death, and destruction, with people eating sand and grass, and guards playing macabre games with the [European] women, and so forth—as if this was the daily reality of the internment camp—is, I maintain, false. [Life in] the average [civilian] internment camp was characterized by boredom, quarrels and disputes [among internees], uncertainty, incomprehensible regulations, lack of privacy and hygiene, hopelessness, and also, toward the end, a shortage of food.

Lanzing is also reliable where important specific details are concerned. To take only one example, he is right to emphasize that Cideng camp was not an armed fortress and did not have watchtowers manned by machine-gun-armed guards, contrary to the claims in Jeroen Brouwers’s Bezonken rood (Sunken Red) (1981) and many other works, including those by a number of former internees there. A few similar points may be slightly in doubt, such as whether the Cideng camp fencing incorporated barbed
wire. Lanzing, who took part in the original construction, says it did not; another internee, a young adult tasked with repairing the fencing (perhaps after Lanzing had left), has reported that it did; photographs taken at war’s end are for several reasons slightly in doubt. These kinds of contradictions are common in camp histories and often cannot be resolved with complete certainty. But the basic point is sound: even the worst of the Japanese internment sites for civilians was far from the Nazi-style prison bastion it has been widely depicted as resembling. Seemingly a comparatively small matter, though one of some importance if rigorous truth-telling about the internment experience is at issue. (As an aside, it should also be pointed out that Lanzing certainly wasn’t the only person at the time or later to think that many of the Dutch trials at the war’s end condemning Japanese to death as war criminals were vengeful and less than just, and even Allied representative Laurens van der Post, in a 1985 letter, said he believed Sone was a man with “an individual sense of honour and decency” whom he had “tried very hard to prevent . . . from being executed as a common criminal.”)

It is perfectly reasonable to ask whether, if Lanzing’s account is fundamentally credible and accurate, the same or similar information and views have been expressed in other survivors’ autobiographical works, and if not, why not. The answer to the first part of the question is that they have, but infrequently. The corpus of personal documents shows enormous variety and remains incompletely studied, so generalizations about them must be tentative. But there were diary writers who clearly made an effort to question gossip and avoid extreme opinions or descriptions, perhaps out of fear of retribution if their writings (which were forbidden) were discovered, but also because, it would seem, they believed that keeping a balanced and realistic view was a key to survival. (By contrast, memoirs composed after the war, sometimes many decades later, by those who had been interned as adults seem more often to show heightened emotions, inaccurate information, and intensely anti-Japanese sentiments.) Memoirs by ex-internees who
spent childhood years in the camps are in large part compromised, sometimes seriously so, by the authors’ efforts to supplement their own limited memories (many were very young) with information and attitudes taken from interviews and the reading of other accounts; only a comparatively small number, no more than a dozen or so, make a serious effort to sort out what they knew, thought, and felt at the time from what they learned later from others. Fred Lanzing’s memoir is one of the latter group. These authors show us a less dramatic camp life than popularly portrayed, and one in which children’s lives differ considerably from prewar times: they are freer of adult supervision, have more time on their hands to “play” or do adventurous things, but often take on adult responsibilities and attitudes. They are conscious of the maturity that circumstances force upon them and frequently are critical of their parents and other adults. They acknowledge the scarcity of food but do not see that as a central issue. Most noticeably, the Japanese are not a focus of their concern, much less hatred. In these accounts they are seldom seen and figure less frequently as the barbarous villains many of their parents often saw, and more as part of a vaguely uncertain and often puzzling human landscape. The children do not spend much time looking back to prewar days and longing for a return to them, or expecting a particular future.

The memoirs that come closest to mirroring Lanzing’s view are those by Ernest Hillen (The Way of a Boy: A Memoir of Java, 1993) and Jan Lechner (Uit de Verte: Een jeugd in Indië 1927–1946 [From a distance: A youth in the Indies, 1927–1946], 2004). Both are longer and in some ways more detailed accounts, but the young lives and perspectives they depict are powerful confirmation of much of what Lanzing tells us. Hillen, for example, recalls that “for me the worst thing about living in [the internment] camp was not the heat, fear, smells, noise, flies, too many bodies, too little food, scratches that festered, and diarrhea—it was the sameness.” He disagrees with adults and the values they sometimes try to enforce, and wants them to recognize that he, at nine or ten, is no longer a child: “I wasn’t a kid. I didn’t pee, I pissed. You didn’t give things
away—[certainly] not food; you traded.” Hillen doesn’t say directly that internment was a privilege to have experienced, but he is very far from suggesting that it was a trauma. Lechner, who was a few years older than Lanzing and Hillen, nevertheless shows us a camp life that is very similar, and certainly not a misery. He hears and witnesses Japanese violence against Europeans, but insists that was not usual in the camps. And he notes that he has wondered in retrospect why he never developed “a total, enduring, and blinding hatred of the Japanese,” but he did not. Like Lanzing, Lechner also sees his wartime experience as on the whole a positive experience, preparing him well for embarking on his adult life.

As to the second part of the question, it is not clear why there are not more accounts from former camp children that corroborate the picture we get from Lanzing and the others. It doesn’t seem possible that only a minuscule number of the more than 27,000 child survivors saw things in more or less the same way, or that they represent only very rare exceptions due to blind luck, special treatment, or extraordinary psychological circumstances (healthy or otherwise). More likely, their perspective is more widely shared, but others have declined to write about it, either because they believed it was unnecessary or unimportant to do so, or because they did not wish to bring attention to themselves, especially by contradicting what had become the received popular view. A Dutch researcher recently discovered how real such pressures may have been when she was informed by several former camp children, now well in their eighties, that their parents had forbidden them to say such outlandish things as that they had felt free and had rather pleasant memories of life in the internment camps; they never realized that others might have had the same feelings, and they certainly never dared express them in public, until they heard of Lanzing’s memoir many decades later. A few individuals have indicated their approval directly to Lanzing, but not spoken or written publicly about it. Some accounts from former camp children in places like Hong Kong and Manila reflect similar experiences and thoughts.
There is a decided irony here, perhaps easily missed by readers unfamiliar with the terms of the continuing debate in the Netherlands over the occupation. The understanding long established in popular myth about the Japanese occupation of the Indies holds that the full force of the “truth” of that experience—the awful truth of unvarying savagery, misery, and so forth—was and still is silenced, and its victims must struggle to be heard. Not only is that at best an exaggeration, but it seems fair to say that something like the opposite has in fact been the case: in the popular arena it is the “benign” views that have been hushed, given short shrift, or dismissed altogether as merely contrarian. The sensationalist popular view, in contrast, now extends to second and third generations whose often spectacularly inaccurate grasp of history proliferates even in more or less official publications, and whose politics appear to make closure regarding the colonial past—and, it must be said, full accommodation of a multicultural present—very difficult indeed.

Fred Lanzing’s memoir is a remarkable and thought-provoking work, notable for its determination to present a factually and emotionally accurate account of the author’s childhood internment, and with it to provide a credible modification of or counterweight to popular mythology and what he sees as a “failed, one-sided, and sterile processing of the war experiences in the Dutch East Indies.” That effort has unquestionably required among other things courage and a thick skin, as well as a certain stubbornness in the face of the realization that it is not likely to succeed in its main purpose. For the historian or historically inclined reader, however, the memoir remains not only a literary pleasure but a key source for understanding the Japanese occupation in Indonesia. It is also of special interest as one of the rare personal sources daring to speak so bluntly about both the realities of war in the Indies and the implications of the subsequent seventy-year-old memory wars that followed. This is a work that deserves an attentive audience outside its native Netherlands.