

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

OF

Vera Radó

I was born in Purwokerto, Central Java, in the then Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia), on 29 July 1926, the second child of Dr. Tibor Radó and Olga Radó-Hecht. My father had migrated to the 'Indies' in 1922 from Hungary to take up a position as mission doctor in Purworedjo, Central Java(1) My brother Ivan was born in Trenggiling on 14 April 1925. My father was naturalised in 1932 (2).

At the time of my birth my parents had moved to Purwokerto, and in 1928 my father took over from Dr. Meihuizen as Medical Superintendent of the local hospital. We moved into the large house next door to the hospital. My memories of that time are expressed in my poem *JAVA 1920s* attached.

When I was five, my father decided to resign from his position, go on a year's furlough, and do a postgraduate degree in Ear Nose and Throat and Cosmetic Surgery. Mid-1931 we travelled to Genoa by the s.s. 'Dempo', and boarded a train there to Budapest. We met our Hungarian relatives for the first time; the ones I remember best are my grandmother Radó-Kóváry and my grandfather Hecht. My mother's sister Bella Hecht had migrated to Java not long after I was born, and had settled in Surabaya, East Java.

My parents decided to leave us in a children's sanatorium just outside of Budapest, while they went to Berlin to study. My mother did a beautician's course. When they returned mid-1932 to reclaim Ivan and me, I turned my back on them and burst into tears. I felt let down and abandoned. Ivan had no such problems; he greeted his parents ecstatically.

My father set himself up in private practice in Surabaya, at Simpang 23, on a main street. We were sent to primary school at Gentengkali and later I followed secondary school at Ketabang (Gouvernements Lyceum), but my schooling was interrupted by the Japanese invasion in March 1942.

They systematically interned all Europeans, but as the Japanese Occupation Army needed doctors, not having any with them, they left my father to practice, until 31 August 1943, when he was taken to the Werfstraat Jail in Surabaya. We were taken prisoner several hours later, and were immediately separated from my brother, who was led to the men's jail. We joined approximately 200 other women and children in the women's section. I enclose a brief account of my experiences during my

internment, written in 1995 when I could finally face the profound traumas I suffered and express them (3)

After surviving the prison camp, we had to be evacuated to Singapore by the British Army to escape being murdered by the rioting Indonesians. From there, in early 1946 Ivan and I were repatriated to Holland, where we were expected to catch up with four years of lost schooling. Ivan was sent to a boarding school in Switzerland for children with respiratory illnesses. He had chronic asthma after his imprisonment, and still suffers from it today. I obtained my leaving certificate from the Pieter de Hooch HBS in Amsterdam in 1948, and returned to my parents in Indonesia. I followed courses in shorthand and typing, and successfully passed an English teacher's exam (4)

On 23 December 1950 I arrived in Sydney, Australia, where I worked as a shorthand/typist and secretary for many years. On 29 August 1953 I married Johan Willem (Joop) Harms, and we were naturalised together on 31 August 1956. I separated from Joop Harms in 1979, and divorced him in 1981, but kept my married name, until I changed back to my maiden name in 1998. The marriage was childless. I enrolled at Macquarie University, Sydney in 1979 to study for a Bachelor of Arts degree, and graduated in 1989 with a BA (Major in Philosophy) (5). After retiring from full-time work, I taught subjects under 'Philosophy' and 'Indonesia – the Land and its People' at the Sydney University of the Third Age (U3A) from 1996 to 1999.

In 1994 I was interviewed by Australian playwright John Misto for his play *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* about two women internees of the Japanese (6). The play had its premiere in 1995 at the Ensemble Theatre, Kirribilli, Sydney. It won the NSW Premier's Prize for English Literature in 1997, was placed in all high-school libraries, and has been an HSC subject since then. John Misto and I have been invited to speak to Year 12 students in many Sydney schools over the last five years about the play, whereby John Misto speaks on his motive for writing it, the dramatic devices he uses and his interviews with ex-Australian Army nurses, and I relate my authentic experiences to a highly appreciative and interested audience of students and teachers. They get it from the horse's mouth, so to speak!

Approximately two years ago I moved into a retirement village, where I enjoy my senior years and look forward to contributing still more to enlightening as many people as possible about the unrecognised women-and-children internees during WWII in the former Netherlands East Indies.

NOTES:

- 1 *Het Land van den Bruinen Broeder, een leesboek voor de Christelijke School*
Excerpt chapter XX "Een zondagmorgen in Srowot" mentions my father's medical care for the native population.
- 2 Staatsblad van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden No. 673 entry No. 15
- 3 In Japanese Captivity, Story of a Teenager in Wartime Java by Vera Rado (1995)
- 4 a. Getuigschrift (HBS A) Amsterdam, Pieter de Hoochstraat 5, 30/6/48
b. Instituut voor Stenografie "Groote" en Machine-schrijven diploma Engels 25/11/50
c. Akte van Bekwaamheid in het geven van lager onderwijs in de Engelse taal 8/6/50
- 5 Macquarie University, Bachelor of Arts degree 5/5/89
- 6 *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* by John Misto, Currency Press Sydney 1996, available in all major bookstores. This is a play about two women internees of the Japanese, one an Australian Army nurse and the other a 15-year-old English schoolgirl, who meet again fifty years after the end of WWII to be interviewed about their experiences. I was invited to write the introduction to the published playtext.

JAVA 1920s

*I remember sunny lawns
fragrant blooms
leafy shrubs
shady trees, a dark
green pond inhabited
by phantom carp.
Two ferocious pups
shaking to death
a big black python
in the driveway.*

*Rice paddies, canefields
marching towards
haze-wrapped mountains,
hugging bamboo-ringed
villages.*

*The rhythmic throb of
wooden tong-tongs
underscoring night calls
of geckoes.*

*Our warm lamplit home
under cool brilliance of
tropical stars.*

*In these memories
my happy childhood lives*

*Vera Rado
20/10/99*