Alettus Albertinus Verveen
A Dutch Child Born In Indonesia

Bert with friend

A Dutch Boy on Java, Indonesia (1930-1946)

In 1928 my father, Dirk Verveen (born in 1903), finished his study of medicine in Holland and was engaged by the Dutch Protestant Mission to work as a general physician in Indonesia (then the Dutch East Indies). In 1929 he married my mother, Mies Vermeer (born in 1909). They spent their honey-moon on the boat to Java, a voyage of four weeks in those times.

My parents first stayed in Klaten, Central Java, for my father's additional on-the-spot training. I was born there in September 1930, and my only sister in 1932.

IIn 1933 my parents started to work in Wonosobo, a small town in the mountains of Central Java, in the existing hospital made from bamboo barracks. Assisted by two Dutch nurses, my father trained from scratch the necessary Indonesian staff (nurses and barefoot doctors, called *mantri's)*. He also supervised the building of a new, large brick hospital. All those years he served a region as large as the Dutch Province of Utrecht (1400 square km - approximately 870 square miles) all on his own.

(About 60 years later, in 1989, eleven physicians were working in Wonosobo and the hospital still functioned quite well.)

Patients living elsewhere were referred to the hospital by the *mantri's.* This was necessary, for the distances were great and the country is mountainous and

rugged. When a patient could not be transported to the hospital, my father went to visit the patient. For such a visit my father used an automobile for the first part, continued on horseback, and walked the final part. My mother, in her spare time, gave lessons to groups of Indonesian girls on subjects not taught at school such as hygiene and embroidery.

In that period my three brothers were born in 1935, 1936 and 1941, respectively. My youngest brother was born after the war in 1948, in The Netherlands.

Wonosobo is beautifully situated between the volcanically active Dieng Plateau and two impressive silent volcanoes, the Sumbing and the Sundoro. The town could be reached from the east by a small and twisting road from Magelang, over the Kledung Pass between the two volcanoes, and from the west by a single-track railway, which ended in Wonosobo. Many people favored - and favor - Wonosobo for a holiday for it has a nice and stable climate.

> On my first visit after the war, in 1976, I discovered to my delight that the surroundings of Wonosobo have a beauty equal to that of the famous Preanger Region east of Bandung on West

> Java: a revealing way to discover how much one takes for granted when one is young and living in some place for a long time.

The doctor's house was built together with, and in front of, the new hospital. It was spacious and nice to live in.

It contained an extension with a carport, kitchen and storage room as well as four rooms for the Javanese servants: a chauffeur, cook, maid and gardener. Hence, our life was a relatively wealthy one, though my father's actual income was not large. My mother used a part of the large garden to grow vegetables with the assistance of our gardener, and another part to raise turkeys. Geese were kept for eggs, as well as for their watchfulness. We also had a cat and a small dog.

My parents prevented us children from having close contact with other European children whose parents were working in typical colonial settings such as in administration or on tea plantations. They probably were aware of their sometimes discriminative attitude towards the indigenous population and did not want us to become infected. So we were sent to the local elementary Dutch-Chinese School. Its population was Javanese and Chinese (from the large section of Chinese living in Wonosobo). We and the children of the Dutch headmaster were the only European children at school. Except for the headmaster's son, my friends were Chinese. (Being the son of the doctor created a barrier for the others, I think.) The language was Dutch, however, so apart from a smattering of the local patois, I never learned to speak Malay or Javanese (a great loss).

Neither racial segregation nor discrimination existed at school or in church. However, gender segregation was complete at school. Boys and girls sat apart in the classroom, played on different school grounds and never (!)

spoke with each other. (The ubiquitous gender segregation formed part of the Islamic culture of Java, unavoidably penetrating the setting of the Christian school.) Though gender segregation did not exist at all at home, also not with respect to the headmaster's children, nor with those of our relatives who visited us only occasionally for distances were great and travel tedious, I have a timid nature, and this daily segregation made me shy of and clumsy with girls: unnecessary, but definite, since it is easy to learn something but nearly impossible to unlearn. I could not play ball games well, and the aggressive behavior of many boys repelled me. I think that I then learned to be a loner.

When I was five years old my parents taught me to read and gave me a book on biology, a Dutch translation of E.G. Huey's A *Child's Story Of the Animal World*. It must have shaped my main interest, biology, as well as my future work, physiological research within a medical context. Not interested in sports but very much in biology, I spent my free time in the hills and gorges near the Seraju River south of Wonosobo, looking for and watching animals and plants - or at home, looking through my father's microscope at the 'invisible' forms of life. I collected insects, living as well as dead, animal bones and skeletons, skins of venomous snakes, and plants - including raising different kinds of banana trees in my plot in our garden. I also extended our menagerie with bees (not much of a success), fish, doves, wild cats, and especially, non-venomous snakes. After capture, the snakes usually ceased their defensive biting quickly and became pets. I am still amazed that my mother not only allowed me to keep them as pets, but also let them roam through our house as long as I kept an eye on them. I usually set a snake free after I had either caught or acquired another. Even today I keep a pair of friendly non-venomous snakes (currently several *Boa constrictor)* as pets in our home.

December 1941. War in the Pacific. I remember hearing our Queen on the radio telling us that the people from the Dutch East Indies would get their independence after the war. Apart from measures against air raids (trench, shelter, exercises, blackout), life went on as usual, at first. Nevertheless, people were apprehensive of the future, knowing that The Netherlands already had been occupied by the Nazis in May 1940.

March 1942. What happened on the day the Japanese arrived in Wonosobo is still etched in detail into my memory. I saw several truckloads of severely wounded Japanese (or Korean?) soldiers unloaded at the hospital: had they been fighting? At last my father came home and told us that the soldiers had been driving over the Kledung Pass at too high a speed and had tumbled into the ravines. Strangely enough, the same thing occurred on following days as well. My father was quite upset - not only because the wounded Japanese officers were to be treated first, but especially because when he finally started to treat the soldiers, their officers prohibited him from using anesthetics. They told him that anesthetics were reserved for officers only! He was horrified. This piece of information made an enormous impression on me, not only because it was unexpected but also because it was unbelievably alien. I wondered if people could be so different that there would even be differences in the sensation of pain. (I soon learned

that this is, indeed, possible and that learning and attitude may influence such a basic phenomenon as the sensation of pain.) I now think that my father's tale also prepared me for the differences in culture and thus in attitude between Europeans and the Japanese (or Koreans - we could not distinguish between them.)

During the following months our life changed. School was forbidden. Our parents and the two Dutch nurses tried to make up for our loss in formal education.

January 1943. At a ceremony, my father had to give a talk (probably the oath required by the Japanese) as well as bow to the Japanese flag to honor their god, the Emperor Hirohito. Father refused. As a Christian he could not give honor to another god. For this crime he was taken away from us on January 7 or 8[1] and we did not see him again until after the war, in October *1945.* The following day the other members of our family were transported to and imprisoned in Camp 7 (originally called Camp 2) in Ambarawa, Central Java.

After the war my father told us that he had been kept in solitary confinement for nine months in Magelang, Central Java. In September 1943, he was transported to a jail in Bandung, Western Java. There he was no longer subjected to solitary confinement and could meet other prisoners. After he had served his time, he became detained in a camp for males in Cimahi, Western Java, which contained about 10,000 men[2].

My father told us that true solitary confinement is torture. Not being able to see *any* other person for a long period of time drives one crazy. He tried to remain sane by mentally reconstructing what he had formerly learned about mathematics. It proved to be an effective protection. This was all he ever told us about his periods in jail.

Before the war, my father already had developed an idea for a method to measure the dimensions of red blood cells (of importance in several tropical diseases) and had done some research on it. In Cimahi he worked as a physician in the camp hospital. The doctors divided work and he took care of patients with ear, nose or throat diseases. In between, he continued his theoretical work on his research project, keeping data on tiny scraps of paper, easily hidden from Japanese searches. After the war he both specialized in otorhinolaryngology and completed his research, which earned him a Ph.D. in medicine *cum laude.*

The camp in which we were imprisoned, Ambarawa Camp 7, had been a military hospital for the native soldiers of the Dutch Army. Already, before the war, it had been declared unfit for use. It consisted of eight or nine dilapidated bamboo barracks in which about 2000[3] women and their children (boys only up to the age of sixteen, at first), as well as a few older men (above sixty), were detained in crowded conditions. So we were suddenly deprived of all privacy.

Infectious diseases plagued the inmates from the very beginning of our internment. After about three weeks my baby brother, Henk, became severely ill with diarrhea. He died within two days. His death not only was a

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[1] Diary of my mother, private collection.

[2] D. van Velden. *De Japanse interneringskampen voor burgers gedurende de Tweede Wereld-oorlog.* (The Japanese prisoncamps for civilians during Worldwar II, in Dutch). J.B. Wolters, Groningen, 1963, p. 535

[3] Ibid., p. 537.

severe shock for my mother, but also made an enormous impression on *all* inmates. Two weeks before, a small boy had died in an accident: playing among logs, one had fallen on him. Henk, however, was the first to succumb to a disease from which he normally might have recovered or might not have become ill at all. His death was an ominous sign.

Life went on, gradually deteriorating. The women had to work hard, tilling fields with hacks (a type of hoe), as well as performing night watches. This was in addition to their usual chores for the family as well as for the community. All older children also took part.

There were also daily roll calls - as well as occasional searches by the Japanese for money and 'forbidden wares' among our meager possessions. These could last for hours, with us staying outside in the burning sun. An insufficient bow or an insolent look at a Japanese could earn one an uncontrolled, heavy beating.

Food became less, and medicine was not provided. Already during the first year of internment our average daily food intake dropped to about 50 percent of what was necessary (1275 instead of 2500 Cal.)[4]. Hunger became permanent and our weight dropped. In this camp the women were weighed regularly, a situation which increased their despondency. In December 1944, my mother's weight was 44 kg (about 102 lbs); at her height of 1.73 m (about 5' 9") it should have been between 60 and 75 kg (135 to 165 lbs).

The starch paste we had to eat for breakfast and lunch did not taste nice, even then, nor was it very filling. It was quite sticky, and difficult to eat. We children were amused at first for both paste and plate followed the spoon on the way up, but daily experience quickly took the fun out of it. Our principal meal consisted of some white rice or maize with a tiny amount of vegetables and a little tripe.

Our camp population did not include a physician or a dentist, only some nurses. Infections, especially intestinal ones, were common. The very ill were hospitalized in our local 'hospital barrack,' where a little additional food was all that could be given. Anesthetics were not available. A boil situated below the now thick and hard skin of my foot - we all walked barefoot - had to be cut open by one of the nurses. This painful experience made me think, again, of the terrible fate of the Japanese common soldier. My mother needed to have a molar pulled. Part of her jawbone went with it and bone splinters had to be cut out, all without anesthesia. Because of her malnutrition, this treatment made her very ill for many weeks, with pain and repeated loss of much blood. Her recovery was very slow. My twelve-year-old sister replaced my mother when she was ill. As a result of such experiences, my mother and we children became welded together in a hard-working social survival-unit based on mutual care and honesty.

The women initially tried to set up school for the children, but the Japanese quickly prohibited this.

I spent my time working my share in our family-unit, like tending our tiny plot in the `garden.' I also worked within the camp community: cleaning the open ditch which ran through the camp and carrying its waste away (this work probably caused the boil); carrying the heavy bags of bulk food which were delivered at the camp entrance; and taking my

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[4] Ibid., p. 347.

turns as a cook in the central kitchen, where I became proficient in steaming rice in large drums. The work in the kitchen gave our family a bonus. Cleaning the drums left the cooks with a tiny amount of extra rice, which their respective mothers distributed among their families.

While cleaning the ditch, I once discovered a large and freshly killed venomous snake. With my childhood experience in skinning poisonous snakes, I decided to clean and cook it for my family. As I was carrying the snake to the kitchen it accidentally slipped out of my hands and, as bad luck would have it, caught on one of my legs with one poison-fang hooked into my knee. I quickly cleaned the spot by burning into it with a red-hot needle, then cleaned and cooked the snake: a very nice and welcome meal for all of us.

I was amazed that I did not feel *any* of the expected pains of the needle burn, while the previous cutting into the sole of my foot had been painful, indeed. I reasoned that my preference of being burned to being poisoned must have caused this strange phenomenon. This episode later turned out to have been another case of instant learning for, ever since, small burns do not bother me: I usually do not feel the intense pain of a burn, *nor* suffer from its afterpain. It is significant, I think, that this relative insensitivity applies to my sense of pain for small burns *only.*

> Many years later, when I taught physiology to medical students, I also lectured on the mechanisms of pain. Because of my experience, I then could demonstrate to them - on myself with the use of a hot soldering iron - the difference between signal (location and nature: 'skin is being burned someplace') and its interpretation (the subjective interpretation as a pain also depends on ones experience and psychological state).

The women tried to make or do something special on our birthdays and on Christmas. In fact, we all learned to make presents of small pieces of wood, cloth or paper, and the girls learned to embroider tiny pieces of cloth. These were valuable gifts because for clothing we had to make do with what we originally had brought with us.

Hunger. My wife, a former inmate of another prison camp (Camp 6) at Ambarawa still remembers the always present, acute feelings of hunger, while I do not. I must have forgotten, as may happen with the memories of intense pain. Some memories stay, others disappear. But I very well remember that I ate every living thing I could catch, such as rat, snake and snail, though such luck was rare. I did draw a line, however. Already during that first year in camp the grown-ups, especially the older men had a different standard. Among the foods we received were soybeans. They were hard and *very* difficult to cook. As a result, they passed through our bodies almost unaffected, to be carried away by the water in the ditch. The picture of some of the older men searching that ditch for those beans is still burned into my mind.

> For me, as well as for anyone who has had such experiences, it is impossible to throw leftover food away. We usually eat it some other day.

Our loss of weight had other effects as well: the women's sanitary towels gradually disappeared from the lines. We boys noted this, though its significance was still obscure to us for we then were, after all, still living in the aftermath of the Victorian Era.

My own sexual feelings and activities also disappeared gradually in the camps. By fall 1944 they were gone.

My sexual interest in girls did not come back after the war, in 1945, when at age 15 I had gained normal weight, but much later - in 1947-48, during the second year I attended high school in The Netherlands. That was also the time in which I, according to my parents, became able to laugh again. I do not know if such delays are incidental or more common, since I have never talked with other victims of my peer group about these effects of our captivity. I later learned[5] that in some women, menstruation disappeared immediately upon their imprisonment. Menstruation disappeared in the others when their body weight fell below a certain level. Both are well-known phenomena in medicine.

Carrying the heavy bags of beans, sugar or salt (which bites into your skin) was a challenge for us small boys and became a contest in which we tried to carry heavier and heavier loads.

With those loads I probably damaged the cartilage of my knees, for ever since they trouble me occasionally, for months at a time. Luckily it is a minor ailment.

We boys also entertained ourselves with athletic training and contests shot-put, jumping (distances as well as height), exercises on high-bar and swinging-rings. Being slender, I specialized on the long jump and on the high-bar. We were lucky this apparatus was available. It probably dated from the time the camp functioned as a military hospital.

The Japanese commander and his staff (later replaced by Javanese soldiers, the Hei-ho) were quartered beside the camp entrance. Their behavior was alien and incomprehensible to us. They could all of a sudden become *mata glap* (Malay for 'berserk'), usually upon witnessing insufficiently submissive behavior on the part of a prisoner. At such times, they might start to beat the offender uncontrollably. Their unpredictability, their loss of self control, and the fact that they beat women (which in our eyes was and is a sign of most uncivilized and demeaning behavior - demeaning for us, but even more so for themselves) made them seem subhuman in our eyes. We not only feared them, but loathed them. We could not hide the loathing, which made the situation worse, of course.

> Later I learned that this was mutual[6]. They despised us since we had lost the war and were still alive, while a true Japanese preferred death above capitulation. That they in turn lost the war but remained alive as well, even experiencing Allied occupation, must have made a profound impression on them. For both Europeans and Japanese, their meeting in this prison setting took the shape of what one now may call prolonged and unabating culture-shock, in which the

[5] Ibid., pp. 359, 360.

[6] Ibid., pp. 417-421.

continuing and unchanging mutual misunderstandings created havoc, denigration, terror and pain.

Japanese punishments of the detainees as a group took the form of institutionalized cruelty, such as standing in the baking sun for hours or crouching with a bamboo pole in the hollow of the knees for a long time.

Given the mentioned medical treatment of their own soldiers, I suspected (and now know[7]) that these punishments, as well as their 'berserk' thrashings were 'normal' army measures, used by the Japanese to discipline their own soldiers.

Another aspect of life in the camps, outright personal cruelty, is not a cultural phenomenon (though cultures may differ in its appraisal) but a horrible aspect of humanity as a whole. My first direct encounter with it concerned an animal. It put deep fear of our Japanese commander in me.

Early in our imprisonment, carrying bags into our camp, I saw our commander kill a cat slowly, very very slowly, compressing it between the door and post of his quarter. The poor animal was shrieking for many long minutes. It was heartbreaking.

Decades later I learned that in some cultures, food (turtles, cats, dogs) is prepared in this way, because a slow torture to death tenderizes the meat. Nevertheless, I consider such behavior as utterly cruel and most debasing.

Not much later I learned, from the behavior of the same commander, that people who are cruel to animals will be cruel to humans, given the chance. The experience had a profound and lasting influence on me. Only once previously have I told it to another person (my wife) and it still is difficult to write down.

The Japanese were our enemies and hence were not protected by our moral code. We, for instance, allowed -- even encouraged ourselves - to steal from them, given the opportunity. With a group of boys, I once had to clean one of the rooms in the Japanese section. There we found an album with Dutch postage stamps, so we looted their loot. That was very stupid for it was quickly discovered, and they easily identified the culprits. The commander then gathered us together, marched us out of the camp towards a ditch somewhere. We had to line up along it. The first boy then had to bow his head (I was fourth in the line, I think). The commander slowly took out his samurai sword, lifted it high over his head and brought it down, not touching the boy's neck... He then laughed and made it clear to us that we should never steal from them again for he would repeat this scene for real. I do not think that any of us mentioned to anybody else what had happened.

The experience of facing death by execution is a profound one. Ever since, I realize I am living on borrowed time -- for

[7] Ibid., pp. 313, 422, 485.

> which I am grateful. But also I am detached, a barrier stands between me and others. I do not readily defend myself and I am inclined to let material things go easily, perhaps too easily.

On September 16, 1944, shortly after my 14th birthday, all boys 12 years of age and older were taken away from their mothers and siblings, not knowing whether they would ever see each other again. We boys were transported to another camp, Ambarawa 8. This camp contained about 1300 people: about 300 boys between 12 and 16, about 850 men of all ages with a preponderance of those above 60, and about 130 nuns (aged between 22 and 68).[8]

The Japanese commander of Camp 8 had granted the wishes of the women originally imprisoned there *(they* had been moved to another camp in Ambarawa) to appoint a vigorous elderly man, a Belgian by the name of Refuge, as internal head of the reorganized camp as well as to let the nuns stay to take care of the internees[9]. Those women must have been gifted with insight, since after the war the boys who had stayed with Refuge and the nuns were in much better condition than those who had become interned elsewhere (in Ambarawa Camp 7).

In Ambarawa 8 our daily ration of food, distributed with justice, was insufficient (about 1400 Cal)[10]. I worked in the garden and incidentally as a porter. A few times I had the luck of finding giant snails in the garden (with shells about 10 cm long - approximately four inches) which I boiled and ate on the spot. The food rations were much too small, however, and as a result death quickly became a daily occurrence among the older people. Working as porters, we unloaded trains but also had to take turns as *lijkensjouwers* ('stiff-carriers'). We carried the coffins with the bodies of the deceased older males out of the camp. For this work we were rewarded with a piece of bread. The job was, hence, coveted (and evenly distributed) even though it was dirty since the hunger-generated oedematic fluid of the deceased dripped out of the makeshift coffins.

> Of the 241 people who died during the camp's existence (about nine months)[11], all were males over 60 except for two who were somewhat younger and two older nuns. Not a single boy died in this period, although they were still growing. Since circumstances did not otherwise differ much between the detained, this phenomenon indicates the existence of an age-related decline of vigour starting, for the male, at about 60 years. It still amazes me that the women as well as the younger people stayed alive so much longer (about 6 months), despite their very low weight and the many infectious diseases they were subjected to. For them, death became common after about March 1945[12]. Does the

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[8] J. Al. *Ambarawa, Bandoengan en de Belg Refuge.* (Ambarawa, Bandungan and the Belgian named Refuge, in Dutch). Ad. Donker, Rotterdam, 1994. ISBN 90 6100 394 6, p. 247.
[9] Ibid., pp. 24-26.
[10] Ibid., p. 148.
[11] Ibid., from the list on pp. 247-251.
[12] Japanese prisoncamps, p. 370.

> metabolic rate decrease and the immunological system become more efficient during the first stages of emaciation?
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> Later it became known that Java had been plundered and that its population had been stricken by famine as a result[13].

One Japanese was kind to us. He secretly carried messages on tiny scraps of paper to our mothers. Much later my sister told me he had been discovered and executed... Sometimes, we boys were sent to the other prison camps to carry loads. Our own staff selected the boys from each specific camp, enabling them to meet their mothers. In this way I was able to visit my family twice. The first time occurred on October 16, about one month after I was taken away. After we had talked with each other, on the way back to the entrance, I saw the high-bar. Since facilities for athletic exercises were absent in Camp 8, I naturally wanted to try it. I was very disappointed in my utter failure to do the familiar exercises. I learned from it, that a relatively short training-free period will result in losing all of the effects of long training.

I do not remember the final time I visited my mother's camp, I must have repressed it, but my sister still knows the details. My mother's diary also contains a description of the event, which occurred on January 6 and 7, ~~1944.~~ 1945 We boys had to assist in the transportation of all inmates of Camp 7 into a train. We were not allowed to speak with our mothers. In her description, we were haggard and tired and quite desperate at not being able to talk with our mothers and having to see our families depart under beastly circumstances - for they were slapped like cattle into an overloaded train - bound for an unknown destiny.

I only remember that I realized I had now lost all my relatives, in three successive stages...

Shortly afterward, on January 28, 1945, a plane flew over our camp. I will never forget this event, which occurred while we were at work in the garden. We saw a giant Dutch flag painted on the underside of each wing. Everyone was very excited for this was a clear signal that liberation was near! But nothing happened for many months.

> As a result, the death rate among the older men dropped for a few days and then *doubled* for *some time,* after which it settled on the pre-plane rate[14]. The effects of hope, followed by a lasting disappointment . . .

Associated with Camp Ambarawa 8 was a work-camp, called Bandungan. It was beautifully situated near a village of that name, on a side of the Ungaran Mountain, about 10 km (6.2 miles) away from Ambarawa. The boys working there had to prepare the soil for farming. In March 1945, I was also transported to this camp, together with about 20 other boys. The camp counted about 200 boys, located in three houses, a few older males and several nuns. At first, we had to plough the fields with hacks (done with 20 or more boys in a row), but that work was about to be finished. We then raised vegetables for distribution to the camps in Ambarawa, as well as for

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[13] F. Glissenaar. Voorheen Nederlands Indie. Een reis door de geschiedenis. (Formerly Netherlands East Indies. A journey through history, in Dutch). Contact, Amsterdam/Antwerpen, 1994

[14] J. Al. Ambarawa, p. 86

our own consumption. This was our main task, but I occasionally worked in the kitchen or was sent outside with a group to cut down trees. During the day we just wore shorts. I had two pairs, already quite worn out. One had a large hole situated over my left buttock; the skin below was burned black by the sun. That piece of skin remained darker for a long time.

In the meantime, Camp 8 was abandoned and all inmates were transported to Camp 7, now a camp for men and boys - where they lived in dire circumstances.

Refuge became head of our Camp Bandungan. Our food situation improved since we grew a large part of it, but also because Refuge managed to obtain a few cattle for slaughter for needed proteins (several sheep, one steer).

I was the only one who possessed a knife with a sufficiently long and sturdy blade, so Refuge borrowed it to kill the cattle. He butchered them humanely. I did not (and still do not) like it, but I learned how to do it quickly. Henceforth, we had an adequate supply of food, and the work was not very heavy (apart from the initial period)[15].

> It turned out that I had been quite lucky to become interned in the two camps of which Refuge was head, for living conditions in all other camps on Central Java were very bad, indeed. Strangely enough I consider the time spent in the camps as a valuable experience, even though I had been robbed of my family in stages and did not know whether they were still alive or not. I did not start any friendships in this period, however, and only very few afterwards. I nearly always keep a distance between myself and the ones I love.
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> I also do not talk about my emotions. I communicate with much more ease in writing. Being a 'loner' must have been an advantage in this period. While being a boy it also was a kind of adventure and I obtained valuable experiences: I learned that people have a truly amazing ability for adapting to dire circumstances, that younger people as well as women appear to have an inherent safety factor which enables them to survive for relatively long periods under circumstances of hard work and an inadequate amount of food. And I now know from personal experience what it means to have to do heavy work to make a living - to *be a* porter, butcher, woodcutter or farm laborer. Given the experiences of my mother (see below), I also learned that an adequate and stern governing staff is a prerequisite for a very large group of people to remain social in their behavior, even though they are quite hungry.

Much later[16], I learned that all inmates of Camp 7 (apart from the boys who then were 11 and 12 years old - another cruel separation) had been transported to Solo (Surakarta, Central Java). This, of course, included my mother, sister and brothers. On January 7, 1945, those being moved not only had been slapped into the train under the eyes of their sons, but they were confined in it for several days, in cramped conditions, with hardly any food and drink, and without sanitary arrangements.

In the camp in Solo my mother fell ill to vitamin-deficiency neuritis

[15] Ibid., pp. 195, 196, 217, 218

[16] Diary.

with severe pains in, as well as a luckily reversible paralysis of, an arm.

Six months later, on June 2, 1945, my mother, brothers and sister were again transported by train to still another camp, Lampersarie, in Semarang, Central Java. A backpack and one small travelling case per person were all that they were allowed. On this journey they were again treated cruelly.

Camp Lampersarie was heavily overcrowded, containing about 8000 women and children[17]. The misery of the latecomers was amplified by the behavior of the local Dutch staff. They believed that everyone was stealing from everyone and did nothing to prevent it. As a result, those who still behaved in a socially responsible manner became doubly bereft of food, not only by the Japanese but also by their own people. My mother's weight dropped to 40 kg (89 lbs). (In my camps [Ambarawa 8 and Bandungan] we were fortunate that stealing of food was a rare event, as far as I know, since it was punished effectively by our own staff.)

My mother again fell victim to the vitamin-deficiency neuritis, with paralysis and pain, while several of her children also became severely ill with intestinal disorders and with mental derangement due to vitamin deficiency. In August 1945, her diary not only mentions feelings of extreme hunger but also of utter despondency[18]. She knew that this situation could not last much longer and that death was near.

In Bandungan, on about August 20, 1945, the usual rumors about the approaching end of the war intensified. Early in the afternoon of August 23, however, *all of a sudden* we had to abandon the camp to go to Ambarawa 7 - that same afternoon. What a heavy blow: we knew that that camp was very bad. In a long row of people, we slowly walked the 10 km which separated the camps, barefoot but with leaden feet. We carried our scant possessions in groups of two, with a bamboo pole slung over one shoulder.

Upon arrival in Ambarawa 7, we seemed well-fed compared to the bone-thin boys we encountered. Camp 7 also was unbelievably crowded (it then contained between 4000 and 5000 people[19], instead of the 2000 of the already overcrowded situation when my family had first been interned). All of the boys, about 800[20], were living in one single barrack, stacked three-high in bunks or sleeping on the floor. It was not easy for us to find a place to sleep.

In this camp the older men died at a rate of between 10 and 15 per day[21]. An example: of the 718 men above 60 who had been transported from Solo and Cimahi, only 20 remained alive[22].

The following day, on August 24, the end of the war was formally announced[23]. I do not remember it at all. We probably did not believe it for the incident with the Dutch airplane had given us a tough lesson. The reality of the war's end only gradually dawned on us, for now we could barter our few remaining pieces of cloth for food, without being battered by the Japanese for smuggling through the fence. Mattresses were cut open to sell the cloth, and the whole filthy camp became covered with white down, whirling around like snow.

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[17] Japanese prisoncamps, p. 536

[18] Diary.

[19] Japanese prisoncamps, pp. 306, 537.

[20] Ibid., p. 306.

[21] Ibid., p. 306.

[22] Ibid., p. 306.

[23] J. Al. Ambarawa, p. 218.

A few days later, I was found by my uncle who invited me to stay with his family in Camp 6 on the other side of the square from Camp 7. I had had no idea his family had been interned so nearby. He had been a surgeon in Malang, East Java. Initially interned in Malang, his family had also been transported to Ambarawa. Because of his medical specialty, at those times rare, he had to take surgical care of the people detained in Ambarawa and he was able to stay with his family, an exception. To be able to live with them, while waiting for news about my parents whereabouts and condition, was a blessing. Food became available and we all started to gain weight. What I had learned before became of use now since I had to kill and clean the chickens they bought.

My uncle finally obtained the long-awaited information about my mother's location, and on September 28, five weeks after the capitulation of Japan, I left for Lampersarie in the protection of a Javanese woman, a friend of the family. It was a journey of several hours by steam-train, filled to the brim with people. I stood on the bumpers between two coaches, somewhat precariously, but the train did not go fast. In Lampersarie I finally met my mother, sister and brothers (one was still very ill). They were living, with many others, in a tiny bamboo shanty. Their situation had, finally and only just in time, improved. They slowly gained weight, but had been and still were worse off than I.

Three times in all, and after months of waiting, my mother had received postcards from my father, place unknown. But at least they knew he was, at that time, still alive. They now told me that they had just received a message from him. He was alive and well, working as a physician in a hospital in Bandung and he would come and get us when he could organize the transport.
I still remember my father's unannounced arrival on October 8. I was standing outside our shanty and suddenly saw him walking towards us. I recognized him immediately, but I could not believe my eyes for he was so short! I was a head taller than he, while he had been a head taller than I when he had been forced to leave us. He had, of course, noted my increase in height, too. He knew what I was thinking for he asked me if I thought that he had grown shorter! Then he explained to me that I had grown taller in the meantime, but had kept our previous comparative heights in mind. My subjective appraisal of his height had not been corrected by normal daily contact. It was a vivid way to learn that we use our own bodies as a basic standard of measure.

Freedom had arrived at last, slowly, sneakingly, and now we were to leave for Bandung on November 7. But gunfights had been going on in the distance for some time. We again were forbidden to leave the camps. We heard rumors about massacres of Japanese soldiers in the jail and, elsewhere, some Dutchmen too. Then, suddenly, in the dead of night, we were awakened by gunfire, very close! We crouched flat to the soil floor of our shanty, lying under our mattresses. That night, I learned that the swish of a bullet means that it has passed harmlessly, that hearing the report of a gun signifies relative safety. None of us got harmed. The next morning we were told that we had been attacked by Indonesian snipers, but that we were saved by the Japanese soldiers, our former guards, who had fought back![24]

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[24] P.M.H. Groen. 'Patience and Bluff': de bevrijding van de Nederlandse burgerge-interneerden op Midden-Java (augustus-december 1945). Mede-delingen van de Sectie Militaire Geschiedenis Landmachtstaf. Den Haag, 1985. p. 138. (Patience and Bluff: the liberation of the Dutch civilian detainees

> On August 17, 1945, just after the Japanese surrender on August 15, the Indonesians formally declared their independence. It was granted them by the Japanese, but not by the Dutch and other nations. The young and still disorganized Indonesian Army resented this. As a result the Indonesians gradually and, at first, reluctantly started their fight for independence[25].

Attacks on the camps increased afterwards. A friend of my parents, a woman we children called Aunt was killed in an attack on Camp Ambarawa 6. To tumble smack into another war was a giant blow and we could not understand it at all, so we called the Indonesian fighters the 'extremists.'

> In retrospect, given information that came decades later, I think that the Indonesians must have been inflamed by the incidental reappearance of Dutchmen with clear and unmistakable intentions to recolonize them, such as replacing the Indonesian flags with Dutch ones[26]. This also violated the promise of independence given by our Queen (whatever the actual phrasing of that message might have been). I still ponder on it. Why could we not (including myself and nearly all detainees), at that time give them what we ourselves had repeatedly fought and suffered for during our own history? Why could we, then, not understand nor honor their wish for independence? We could not, so they fought for it, and another atrocious war was the tragic result.

Our journey to Bandung was delayed, waiting for a safe means of transport to the airport. Once on the way, we enjoyed the first flight in our life in a Douglas Dakota prepared for transporting troops. Upon our arrival in Bandung, we were stationed in a brick house, situated beside the hospital where my father worked. Though completely bare, it was an unbelievable luxury to use a whole house just for our family. Not for long, however. Early in the morning of December 3 or 4, walking alone on the porch, all of a sudden a whiplash of bullets occurred, cracking into the brick wall behind me. They were shooting at me! I sprinted into the house in no time. We did not have guards so we stayed inside, fearing the arrival of the Indonesians with their cleavers and spears. Luckily they did not come. It must have been a sniper, and we were moved to a single room within the hospital encampment, which was guarded by Indian soldiers. On a quiet day I went outside and pried a bullet out of the mortar. I carried it with me for many years - a symbol that I was, by repetition now, living on borrowed time. I do not carry it with me anymore, so my sense of borrowed time must have weakened.

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on Central Java (August-December 1945). Notices from the Section Military History of the Staff of the Army, The Hague, 1985, in Dutch).

[25] Ibid., pp. 104-114.

[26] J. Bosdriesz & F. Glissenaar. *Voorheen Nederlands Indie. Deel 2. De Strijd. TV Dits B.V.* /AVRO 1994 (Formerly *Netherlands East Indies. Part 2. The War (for Independence)*.TV production, 1994, in Dutch).

All of the children had lost three years of schooling, so lessons were started - while all around us the war intensified. Irregular bursts of gunfire became common. The eery sound of shells in the air, the bangs of cannon and of the explosions, one could not get used to it.

> War films never seem realistic to me, for the sounds of bullets or shells passing through the air is missing. Given the bangs of cannon, gunfire and explosions only, my ears tell me that the situation is relatively safe, while my eyes tell me it is not.

We climbed on the roofs of the hospital to look at planes bombing nearby houses and we saw the fires caused by the explosions. My heart cringed for the people caught in it, even though I knew that they might have wanted to kill us.

A dream of screams in the night. Horrible screams. When do they stop? A very bad dream. Was it a dream? I did not and do not really want to know. I have never before mentioned this experience. Rumors abounded that the people living in the village behind the hospital had been massacred. The soldiers mounted mortars on a lawn at the back of the hospital, next to the village of the massacre. Shells were thrown up - we could follow them with our eyes - and curved down on the village. Upon their explosions some splinters fell back onto the lawn. We picked them up, but were sent away by the soldiers. Several days later I saw the pictures of a trench in that village. It was filled with many mutilated bodies, including women. Children, too? I do not want to remember. Those poor people had been caught in an unrelenting guerilla-war. I later learned that *all* parties had become involved with massacres during this period[27].

Christmas 1945. Roman Catholics and different Protestant denominations congregated in the hospital chapel to pray and sing together. While we were singing, planes started once again to pass through the air above us. Bombs exploded. Peace on earth ... with bombers in heaven ... and hell all around ... ?

> After my wife had read this part she told me that she now understands why I often did not want to join in the celebration of Christmas in church, sometimes even becoming morose and angry during the service...

June 1946. We flew by plane to Batavia (Jakarta), to leave by boat for The Netherlands on June 5. We arrived in my parents' country on August 1, 1946. My mother's brother and his wife took us into their house. They let us live with them for a long time. Not only had we lost everything, but we had heavy debts. My father had, for instance, to pay his life insurance company the backlog over six years, a fortune in those days. The Missionary Service helped, however, so my parents could get the means to let us learn and study as well as for my father to specialize. It took my parents decades to pay their debts.

We all worked very hard. My age group had to cram five years of high school into three, for example. As a result some subjects were lost on the way, such as history and geography. It also was too short a time to really

[27] F. Glissenaar. pp.159-163

form a solid base for the foreign languages we both wanted and had to learn (English, French and German).

Liberation? The war in Indonesia went on for years... We ourselves just did not hear the cracks of bullets nor the whine of shells anymore. The people in Indonesia, their soldiers, as well as ours did, however..., and suffered (some still suffer)..., as did those among our potential soldiers who did not want to be conscripted to fight this war and were jailed for periods of up to five years[28].

On the boat to Holland we had already received an unbelievable message. A theological quarrel, followed by a split within our denomination (Dutch Reformed), was taking place in The Netherlands. I could not believe it, but the news proved to be true. I thought of that Christmas in hell, celebrated in unity. And here? Segregation according to the religious sect and sub-sect. People buying their goods only from members of their own sect: outright discrimination. A war had just ended for them, too. I had left a mad world to arrive in a crazy one. Such religious fights were common even within our student associations, parroting elders. Fundamentalism, one would call it now. It was very disappointing. Do people learn from their experiences? I must have lost my faith in religion then.

Those of my generation and later ones may have asked themselves precisely this kind of question too, for our society changed course slowly but definitely and public opinion evolved gradually to finally ban discrimination between people. We still feel ourselves placed above and hence discriminate against nature, however. We are learning, now, but much too slowly, and wars are already on the increase. We have to learn to curb our numbers and to live *with* instead of off nature.

In 1977 Japanese physicists had, within the context of an international group, organized a scientific meeting in Tokyo. I was invited to present the opening lecture at that congress. I was apprehensive about going to Japan, but then decided to go together with my wife, also a former detainee. After the meeting, we visited the countryside and several of Japan's famous towns. I am very glad we did, for there we learned that many habits, such as bowing to each other, shouting and early exercises before the start of work (habits which they had forced upon us during the war and which were so alien and offensive to us) formed part and parcel of their culture, of their daily life. Part of our pain had been the result of misunderstandings on *both* sides, with dramatic, actually tragic, results.

I do not want to give the impression that I accept the atrocities. But atrocities are not so much an aspect of culture, as of human nature. There does not exist a single group that has not been involved in atrocities in all these wars (or any other war).

Suffering must not be multiplied, torture must not be condoned. And no group can point a finger toward another. All of us are guilty, even if by implication only, whether we like it or not. I do hope that we will learn to curb this aspect of human nature.

In 1976 my wife and I went back to Java. It was our first visit after the war. I was delighted not only by the beauty of Java and of its people, but even more by their free and equal acceptance of us. After our arrival in

[28] Ibid., pp. 206, 207.

Wonosobo, I met some of our former servants and a classmate. They all welcomed me so warmly, it moved me deeply.

The war was finally over, for us, after these two visits...

ALETTUS ALBERTINUS (BERT) VERVEEN. In 1949, Verveen completed secondary education and he studied medicine from 1949-57, receiving his M.D. degree in October, 1957, from the University of Amsterdam.

In 1957, Verveen married Ellen Marion Keulemans, also a physician. She had been interned for a time in the same prison camp as he, but they never met until attending medical school in Amsterdam.

Between 1957 and 1967, Verveen performed military service and worked in various biomedical research facilities in the Netherlands, Italy and the United States. From 1967 until his retirement in 1991, he served as a full professor of physiology at the University of Leiden. He has published numerous papers in both English and Dutch and speaks several languages.

Among many hobbies, Verveen enjoys observing animal behavior. He publishes papers on snake behavior, mainly of *Boa constrictor*, in *Lacerta* and in *Litteratura Serpentium*. His main problem is having only 24 hours in a day!

Bert with co-worker. This chicken is used to demonstrate some of the medical information about which Dr. Verveen teaches.

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