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**‘The *withuiden* were worth their contempt,
the Iraqis not’.**

Jewish experiences in the Dutch East Indies during the Second World War and Japanese occupation, 1939- 1945

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Abstract

European Jews and their experiences during the Second World War in Europe are a well-covered subject. However, their experiences in Asian colonies during the same period have been examined far less, especially their experiences in the Dutch East Indies. In this article, I examine the experiences of European Jews (including European refugees) just before and during the Japanese occupation in the Dutch East Indies. My goal is to challenge the conventional view that Japanese authorities blindly followed the demands of their German allies to single out Jews for worse treatment than that meted out to other Europeans. I base my analysis on ego documents, including eyewitness accounts and memoirs, supplemented with newspaper articles. These sources allow me to sketch a multi-layered picture of the experiences of European Jews in the Dutch East Indies during the Second World War and during the Japanese occupation. In the end, I argue that the Japanese took rather random measures against Jews, rather than systematically persecuting them as their German allies wanted.

Keywords: Second World War Asia, Japanese occupation, Baghdadi Jews, European Jewish refugees, Dutch East Indies, internment

Introduction

The experiences and escape routes of Jews in Europe before and during the Second World War are quite well-researched, as opposed to their experiences in places outside Europe.¹ In recent years, however, historians have started to examine these ‘exotic escape destinations’ in the Global South in the 1930s and 1940s.² Concurrently, there is a new interest in the history of Jews in former colonies.³ For Asia, historians have mostly focused on the former British colonies such as India, Singapore, and Malaysia. The focus of this research is largely centered on the transnational trading network founded by Iraqi Jews in these British colonial spaces. Known as Baghdadi Jews, they were originally from the Middle East, primarily Iraq.⁴ The former Dutch East Indies (currently Indonesia) has remained understudied in the Jewish colonial Asian research agenda. Moreover, the study of European Jewish refugees and residents in the late colonial period and during the Japanese occupation in the Dutch East Indies is not well-covered yet.⁵

One of the reasons for this lacuna is that Jews in the Dutch East Indies tended to play down or deny their Jewish roots, making it hard to trace them. This tendency is understandable given the great deal of latent antisemitism in late colonial Dutch East Indies society during the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the Dutch pro-Nazi party *the Vaderlandsche Club* and, later, the *Nationaal Socialistische Beweging* (NSB, National-Socialist Movement) gained a large following in the colony.⁶ This could be one of the reasons that the Dutch authorities, in the midst of the economic crisis of the 1930s, did not admit many European Jewish refugees in the colony, although a couple of hundred managed to enter the Dutch East Indies during these years.⁷ Although many Jews hid their ancestry, we do know that on the eve of the Second World War, there were approximately three to five thousand

1 For example: Koreman, *Gewone helden*.

2 In 2017, a conference on the subject was organised, entitled ‘Emigration from Nazi-Occupied Europe to British overseas territories after 1933’: <https://homepage.univie.ac.at/irene.messinger/media/2017%20Exile%20Conf%20Prg%20&%20Reg%20Form%20Speaker.pdf> (accessed 4 September 2023).

3 Katz, Leff and Mandel, *Colonialism and the Jews*.

4 Imber, “A late imperial elite Jewish politics”, 48-85; Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*; Fredman Cernea, *Almost Englishmen*; Betta, “From Orientals to Imagined Britons”, 999-1023; Stein, “Protected Persons?”, 80-108; Goldstein, *Baghdadi Jewish networks*.

5 Berg, Candotti and Touw, “Selamat Sjabbat”, 4-19.

6 Hadler, “Translations of antisemitism”, 302; Van der Veen, “1855. Gelijke rechten voor Joden in Indië”, 381.

7 Berg, Candotti and Touw, “Selamat Sjabbat”, 5-6.

Jews living in the archipelago as part of a group of people categorized as 'Europeans' that comprised around 290,000 people.⁸

This article aims to analyse the experiences of this refugee group along with other Jewish residents who were already living in the Dutch East Indies during the Japanese occupation. Both newcomers and people who had lived there for decades had to deal with ever-increasing restrictions on their lives. It was unclear whether these measures were primarily directed against groups categorized as Jews, Europeans, or both. In this article I argue that in fact, the Japanese implemented their German allies' anti-Jewish policies rather haphazardly and, seemingly, without much understanding of the (racialized) basis upon which anti-Jewish measures were predicated.⁹

The few publications about Jews in the Dutch East Indies in the first half of the twentieth century and during the Japanese occupation are either descriptive or quite broad.¹⁰ Only Rotem Kowner and Jeffrey Hadler have written in-depth studies about the subject.¹¹ Their studies, however, do not use ego documents as sources. My study fills this gap by supplementing the histories we already know with the personal perceptions and experiences of Jews living in the Dutch East Indies at the time.

At first glance, it would appear that Jewishness was the crucial factor for internment. But the Japanese categorized some Jews as 'Asian', including the Baghdadi Jews. This categorization kept them out of internment camps for a while. The level of 'Europeanness' was the main Japanese criterion for incarceration in the beginning.¹² The Japanese made life extremely difficult for all Europeans (including Jews). They removed all European traces from the public space in order to give free rein to the so-called 'Greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere'.¹³ Sooner or later, all Jews (as well as other Europeans) were interned or forced to live in a ghetto such as the 'designated zone' in the Hongkew area in Shanghai.¹⁴

My primary sources consist of eyewitness accounts by Jews, most of which I found in the *Indische collectie* (Indies collection) at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide studies in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. These were recorded between the 1940s and the 1960s, and they mainly describe the

8 Blom et al., *Geschiedenis van de joden*, 350.

9 Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis & Jews*, 169-266.

10 Berg, Candotti and Touw, "Selamat Sjabbat", 4-19; Hadler, "Translations of antisemitism", 291-313; Hanny Rachman, "Jewish existence in Indonesia", 1-25; Kowner, "Indonesia's Jews".

11 Kowner, "The Japanese internment"; Hadler, "Translations of antisemitism".

12 Kowner, "The Japanese internment", 352.

13 Meijer, *In Indië geworteld*, 221.

14 Medzini, *Under the shadow of the rising sun*, 78-79.

experiences of Europeans (including Dutch people, Austrians, and Germans) during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies.¹⁵ In addition, I use some articles from a periodical published by the Jewish organizations in the colony: the Palestine Foundation Fund 'Keren Hayesod', the Dutch East Indies Zionist League, and the Association of Jewish Interests in the Dutch East Indies, titled *Erets Israel*. This monthly appeared between 1926 and 1942.¹⁶ I also employ articles from local Dutch Indies newspapers such as the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*.¹⁷

It is important to remember that all ego documents are biased. Ego documents only provide a description of events from the perspective of one person, who brings his or her own specific perspective into the story. This means the sources can be authentic and truthful, while also being subjective and unreliable. They are useful, despite their limitations, in creating a varied and complete picture of historical events.¹⁸ Moreover, other sorts of archival sources are also limited in their own ways, including subjectivity and lack of reliability. Certainly, historians must remember the context in which the document was written and be aware of ambiguities and contradictions within the documents. Ego documents are particularly prone to obscuring certain facts because they were too horrible or personal to tell.¹⁹ Hence, my use of newspapers and periodicals in order to round out the picture of the events told in the ego documents.

Jewish life in the Dutch East Indies before the start of the Second World War

Traces of a Jewish presence in the Indonesian archipelago can already be found before European colonisation of the Moluccan 'spice islands' in the sixteenth century, but never on a large scale.²⁰ After the emancipation of the Jews in the Netherlands in 1796, Jews were allowed to work for the colonial government of the Dutch East Indies, but they never moved there in large numbers. These Jews were mainly from the middle or higher echelons of society.²¹

15 400 Indische Collectie (NIOD Instituut voor Oorlogs-, Holocaust- en Genocidestudies) – NIOD (archieven.nl) (accessed 30 August 2023).

16 Berg, Candotti and Touw, "Selamat Sjabbat", 10, 11; *Erets Israel* 13:8 (1939) front page.

17 Via www-delfer.nl of the KB (Dutch Royal Library) in The Hague.

18 Baggerman and Dekker, "De gevaarlijkste van alle bronnen", 11-12.

19 Mascuch, Dekker and Baggerman, "Egodocuments ad History", 39-40.

20 Berg, Candotti and Touw, "Selamat Sjabbat", 4.

21 Blom et al., *Geschiedenis van de joden*, 349. See Van der Veen's article in this special edition.

From 1854 onwards, three legal categories existed in the Dutch East Indies: 'Europeans', 'natives', and 'Foreign Orientals' (*Vreemde Oosterlingen*) such as Arabs and Chinese residents.²² It was no coincidence that the legal category of the privileged group was called 'European'. Many non-Dutch Europeans (such as Germans and British people) came to the archipelago to make their fortunes.²³ Ashkenazi Jews were considered part of the European category and Baghdadi Jews, who held Iraqi nationality, were categorized as Foreign Orientals. Around 1860, no more than 20 or 30 European Jewish men lived in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) and several Baghdadi Jewish families lived in Surabaya.²⁴ A few hundred more Baghdadi Jews arrived around 1900. They were active in a commercially successful trading diaspora linking fellow Baghdadi Jews across South and Southeast Asia. The trading house of David Sassoon with its headquarters in Bombay is especially well-known.²⁵ In the late 1930s, the number of Jews in the Dutch East Indies probably increased to more than 2500 people. As many Jews kept their origins hidden, a considerable number of them were probably not included in the last official census of the Dutch East Indies in 1930.²⁶ Their presence did not necessarily mean a visible Jewish lifestyle. In Batavia, the colonial authorities never allowed European Jews to build a synagogue nor to appoint a rabbi.²⁷

At the same time, European Jews were more privileged in the colony than Jews in the Netherlands in the first half of the twentieth century. In the colonial hierarchy of the Dutch East Indies, European Jews immediately belonged to the 'superior' European upper layer of society from the moment they arrived, regardless of their work. This is aptly described by the Jewish law professor Willem Frederik Wertheim, who also discusses the rising threat of war in his memoirs (1991). His memoirs included diary notes from his wife, Hetty Wertheim-Gijse Weenink, which makes the picture he sketches more reliable and complete.²⁸ After the Second World War, he became a professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam.²⁹ He himself was of Jewish ancestry, whereas his wife was not. The couple considered the archipelago a safer place than the Netherlands:

22 Luttikhuis, "Beyond race", 540.

23 Ibidem, 540.

24 Van der Veen, "1855. Gelijke rechten voor Joden in Indië", 378.

25 Roland, *Jews in British India*, 16.

26 Kowner, "An obscure history".

27 Berg, Candotti and Touw, "Selamat Sjabbat", 8.

28 Wertheim and Wertheim Gijse Weenink, *Vier wendingen in ons bestaan*, 153.

29 Meindert Fennema, "W.F. Wertheim", *De Groene Amsterdammer* 46 (11 November 1998). <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/w-f-wertheim> (accessed 23 August 2023)

Yet, given my Jewish descent, the Dutch East Indies seemed to us a safer place than Holland. In the Dutch East Indies, as a Jew you simply belonged to the Europeans, so to the colonial upper class. The strong discrimination there was mainly directed against the indigenous population, the Natives. Differentiation within the European caste was negligible in that regard. However, after our return to Batavia in 1938, we would soon be confronted with the persecution of the Jews in Europe, due to the arrival of German and Austrian Jews in Batavia, who had fled the persecution by the Nazis and hoped to be admitted, either to the Dutch East Indies, or to Australia or New Zealand.³⁰

Indeed, a couple of hundred Ashkenazi Jewish refugees (including Dutch, German, and Austrian Jews) arrived in the Dutch East Indies in the 1930s.³¹ Exact numbers are not available, but it was just a small percentage of the 37,000 German Jews who escaped Germany in the first years of the Nazi regime. After the annexation of Austria in March 1938, this number increased.³²

After the conquest of the Dutch Netherlands

From 10 May 1940, when the German occupation of the Netherlands began, several hundred Dutch Jewish refugees arrived in the Dutch East Indies. Upon arrival, they were questioned intensely regarding their political affiliation by the Immigration Service, which worked closely with the Political Intelligence Service. But from the moment the Netherlands was occupied, the policy was to admit all Dutch people (including Jews).³³ While awaiting the outcome of their admission request, they were temporarily housed in a refugee camp on Onrust, an island off the coast near Batavia. Later, a larger refugee camp was established at Buitenzorg (now Bogor), called Tjitrap.³⁴ Interestingly, although there were many newspaper articles about these refugees, reporters rarely mentioned the refugees' Jewish background. A

30 Wertheim and Wertheim-Gijse Weenink, *Vier wendingen in ons bestaan*, 157. All translations by author.

31 Berg, Candotti and Touw, "Selamat Sjabbat", 5-6.

32 Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis*, 361-363.

33 "Immigratie van Vluchtelingen. Ruimer standpunt tegenover Nederlanders", *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* (3 December 1940).

34 "Nieuwe stroom van vluchtelingen. Tijdelijke opschorting der Toelating noodig", *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* (29 January 1941).

list of names of recently arrived refugees was published in the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* in November 1941, and Jewish ancestry was not brought up.³⁵

In order to be admitted to the colony, these refugees needed financial guarantees such as employment contracts. Dutch colonial authorities wanted to make sure that these new arrivals would not become a burden to the public welfare system.³⁶ Despite these barriers to admission, the Asian escape route of which the Dutch East Indies was part still seemed a better option than Europe itself, where the failure of the Evian Conference in 1938 spelled an end to hopes for a safe place to live in Europe.³⁷ Shanghai was a remarkable exception to this trend. It was the only place accepting European Jewish refugees without a financial guarantee until, this colony, too, stopped admitting them in August 1939.³⁸

According to Dutch Navy officer Abraham Gerard Vromans, who had been active as an officer in several roles in the Dutch East Indies,³⁹ most Dutch Jewish refugees were married to non-Jewish women. Whether Jewish or not, the immigration service had established a new refugee camp for these newcomers at Tjitrap where the circumstances were 'quite good'.⁴⁰ According to the manager of the refugee camp, J.H. van Arkel, the situation reminded him of a 'mountain hotel at Java'. Most of the refugees, 90 percent, were of Jewish ancestry. For them it must have been a disappointment to be interned in a refugee camp since they had expected 'to be immediately absorbed into society' according to Van Arkel.⁴¹

In order to help the refugees, a 'Committee for the Support of Jewish Refugees' was established in Surabaya. This committee regularly asked the aforementioned Willem F. Wertheim to help in the admission procedure:

35 "Nederlandsche Vluchtelingen", *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* (11 November 1941).

36 Cronin, 'Framing the refugee experience', 52.

37 After the Nazi's came to power this conference had been convened to discuss the Jewish refugee issue. None of the European countries was willing to ease its immigration restrictions, let alone grant Jews a Nansen passport which would give them freedom of movement. Frank and Reinisch, *Refugees in Europe 1919-1959*, 6. The Norwegian arctic explorer Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) established this first legal system for refugees, after he negotiated the exit and placement of numerous displaced persons during the 1920s. The Nansen passport provided stateless refugees with a form of identification. Ibidem, 24.

38 Reynders Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 100.

39 Archieven.nl – 2.1.1. A.G. Vromans (NIMH / Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie) (accessed 23 August 2023).

40 NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Indische collectie, entry no. 400 (hereafter NIOD), inv. number 5101: Monografie van A.G. Vromans, 23.

41 NIOD, entry no. 400, inv. number 3077, Verslag van J.H. van Arkel, 1-4.

In my position of professor with connections to the Department of Justice, but of course also because of my Jewishness, I was repeatedly called upon to help Jewish refugees. On several occasions, I succeeded in either helping Jewish doctors to obtain visas for Australia, or if they were specialists of which a shortage existed in the Dutch East Indies (such as a psychiatrist-neurologist) to obtain admission for them so that they were able to settle here after an additional tropical exam at the Medical University in Batavia.⁴²

In addition, both Jewish and non-Jewish families made their homes available to house European Jewish refugees.⁴³ An example of such a hospitable Jewish family was the household of the chief editor of the monthly *Erets Israel*: S.I. van Creveld. Van Creveld's daughter, H.E. van Creveld, recalled in an eyewitness account recorded in 1987: 'my father became involved in refugee aid. From Europe came Jewish people who had fled the Nazi regime. They were received in Batavia by friends of my parents and often sent to my father in Bandung. We ourselves had two families with small babies in the house.'⁴⁴

This showed a sense of solidarity with the European Jewish refugees that was felt in the Dutch East Indies, despite the relatively small number of refugees who were eventually allowed to stay. Excerpts from *Erets Israel* and the Dutch Indies newspaper *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* made mention of the transitory nature of these refugees. According to the latter, they only seemed to be calling in at the Dutch East Indies coast to supplement their fuel supplies.⁴⁵ Most European Jewish refugees apparently deemed destinations further east safer and probably easier to gain admission to. This supposition is further bolstered by an article in *Erets Israel* that in June 1939 relates a story of a 'refugee ship' in the Batavia harbour, bound for Shanghai, that asked for help for the 460 people on board, most of whom were not prepared at all (..) for a trip to the tropics, and that financial assistance was badly needed.' This help was immediately arranged according to the article: 'A single call in the papers was enough to get the clothes and help pouring in from all sides, (..) this assistance surpassed our wildest dreams.'⁴⁶

42 Wertheim and Wertheim Gijse Weenink, *Vier wendingen*, 159.

43 Touw, *Zwijgen uit solidariteit*, 21.

44 NIOD, inv. number 7541, Creveld H.E. van, 1987 joden: Bandoeng: Tjihapit; Batavia: Adek.

45 See amongst others: "Joodsche Vluchtelingen in Singapore", *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* (19 September 1938), 1; "Joodsche vluchtelingen te Priok", *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* (16 June 1939), 1.

46 "Vluchtelingenschip", *Erets Israel* 13:9 (June 1939), 10.

Only a few days after the start of the German occupation of the Netherlands in May 1940, marked by heavy fighting and the devastating bombing of Rotterdam, the Dutch forces surrendered.⁴⁷ Administrative officials in the Dutch East Indies immediately received the order to arrest and intern all 'enemy subjects', which meant all German nationals who were living in the archipelago. According to Cornelis van Heekeren, who was a colonial civil servant in the Dutch East Indies at the time, German and Austrian Jewish refugees were also among those so-called 'enemy subjects', as well as people with German citizenship who had already lived in the archipelago for years and who had almost 'forgotten' their German citizenship. A telling example is the letter written by a German Jewish refugee addressed to the Dutch Queen Wilhelmina, dated 29 October 1942, in which he underlines his loyalty to the Dutch. He explains why he had not become naturalized Dutch earlier, and further detailed that he 'has given his children an exclusively Dutch education (...) The Netherlands East Indies had given him his sustenance, his family and the feeling that this was his homeland, so that he never considered it necessary to have himself naturalized, the less so as this step was not even required by military persons or other government servants.' Moreover, he added that the already existing rift with his native country was further widened to the 'breaking point, when the 'Dritte Reich' commenced to persecute the members of his race and religion.'⁴⁸

The idea was that it was better to arrest each German national first and ask questions later. Besides, Dutch colonial officials perceived German Jews as a risk, because it was rumoured that the Nazis sometimes blackmailed Jews living abroad if they still had relatives living in Germany.⁴⁹ A total of nearly 2800 'enemy subjects' were transported from various detention centres to one large camp called Lawé Sigala-Gala in North Sumatra.⁵⁰ That camp was divided into six blocks. The Jewish internees were placed in Block E, the 'Jewish block', which was located opposite the 'moderates' block. All other blocks were 'Nazi' blocks.⁵¹ In December 1941, the colonial government decided to transport all German internees to British India because of the imminent landing of the Japanese after the fall of Pearl Harbor.⁵² The

47 Blom and Lamberts, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden*, 351.

48 NL-HaNA, Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (Londens archief) en daarmee samenhangende archieven, (1936) 1940-1945 (1958) entry no. 2.05.80, inv. number 661, request dd. 29 October 1942.

49 Van Heekeren, *Batavia seint*, 52.

50 Touw, *Zwijgen uit solidariteit*, 22.

51 Van Heekeren, *Batavia seint*, 112-113.

52 De Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, 852.

Japanese bombed the last transport boat on its way to British India. This boat, called the 'Van Imhoff', capsized. Its sinking was disastrous for the refugees on board. There is still debate and speculation about what actually happened before the boat was sunk. There have been allegations that the Dutch crew did nothing to rescue the internees, while saving themselves. Supposedly, keys were thrown into the general direction of the lower locked hold where the prisoners were interned before the crew decamped. Of a total of 478 prisoners, 411 people died, among which all the Jews on board.⁵³

Jewish experiences during the Japanese occupation

The Japanese threat increased with the fall of the British stronghold of Singapore in February 1942.⁵⁴ In the beginning of March of this year, the decisive Battle of the Java Sea took place. The Dutch East Indies government capitulated on 8 March 1942, after which the Japanese interned all Europeans.⁵⁵ These included most of the Dutch Jews and other European Jewish refugees, estimated at a couple of thousand. Women were first sent to separate camps, followed by the men. German and Austrian Jews were not interned, as they were considered to be Japanese allies, based on their citizenship.⁵⁶

Before the Japanese occupation, Dutch colonial authorities had regarded the Baghdadi Jews, who were Iraqi citizens, as belonging to the category of 'Foreign Orientals', like the Arabs and the Armenians. In contrast, Jews of Dutch origin were considered fully 'European'. The Japanese initially used this categorisation as well, which meant that Baghdadi Jews also remained outside the camps. This was because the main criterion for Japanese detention was the level of Europeaness and, furthermore, Iraq was not at war with Japan. Only the so-called *asal-oesoel*, the proof of an Asian ancestor, could save people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry from internment. In 1942, having one Indonesian ancestor was sufficient to remain outside of the camps, but by 1943 all Europeans with more than one white ancestor were interned.⁵⁷ As a result, European Jews tried hard to come up with proof of enough Asian ancestors, while more established Jewish residents who had

53 Stauder, "Verzwegen drama"; Van Reybrouck, *Revolusi*, 164.

54 Bieder, *The Jews of Singapore*, 94

55 Somers and Schreuder, *Gestrand in Indië*, 9.

56 Touw, *Zwijgen uit solidariteit*, 24.

57 Burgers, *De garoeda en de ooievaar*, 296.

been born in the colony could also remain outside the camps longer. But beginning in August 1943, the Japanese demanded that all Jews, regardless of their nationality, register for internment. This group also included Austrian, German, Iraqi (Baghdadi) and stateless Jews.⁵⁸ Before this decision was taken, several eyewitness accounts clearly indicated an increasing interest among Japanese authorities in Jewish matters, which their German allies must have instigated. For example, on 6 April 1943, Hetty Wertheim-Gijse Weenink wrote in her diary:

Fascinating story of Annie H. (of Jewish ancestry herself) who had to drive with a *Nipponner* through the city and point out 'Jews' on the street. 'I don't understand it', he had said, 'point them out to me'. Annie had thanked for the honour and said she could not see them either. So, there are Germans here again who are inciting the Japs to take anti-Semitic measures.⁵⁹

The Japanese were initially not anti-Jewish. In fact, they viewed them as an 'Asian' people, especially the Iraqis. In Japan, they even received a large group of European Jewish refugees from Poland.⁶⁰

The sudden decision to intern all Jews at once was a remarkable shift in the policy of the Japanese occupiers, especially considering their lenient policy towards Jewish refugees in Japan in 1938.⁶¹ The actual motive for this sudden change in their policy is not entirely clear but it is generally linked to the visit of some high-ranking German officials in the first half of 1943. These included the Consul-General in Mukden, Ernest Karl Ramm, the Consul in Kobe, H. Bräunert, and the economic adviser Helmuth Wohltat.⁶² The latter seems to have played a central role, since along with his economic advice, Wohltat frequently discussed the status and 'danger' of the local Jews with the Japanese. However, due to their limited numbers in the archipelago, and the fact that most of them were already interned, it was a minor issue on the German agenda.⁶³

⁵⁸ Kowner, "The Japanese internment", 349, 351-352; Van Velden, *De Japanse interneringskampen*, 317.

⁵⁹ Wertheim and Wertheim Gijse Weenink, *Vier wendingen*, 272.

⁶⁰ Cassuto, "Joden achter het kawat", *Java Post* Joden achter het kawat | Java Post (accessed 4 September 2023). <https://javapost.nl/2011/12/16/joden-achter-het-kawat/>

⁶¹ Somers and Schreuder, *Gestrand in Indië*, 30.

⁶² Kowner, "The Japanese internment", 355.

⁶³ Ibidem, 356-357.

An indirect cause of the upswing in interest in Jews was the proliferation of antisemitic conspiracy theories that had already been circulating for decades in Southeast Asia, and which the Nazis drew upon.⁶⁴ Before the Japanese incarcerated all Jews, Murase Mitsuo (1908-1949), initiated a small antisemitic campaign. He was the deputy head of the Kempeitai, the Japanese secret police. Mitsuo delivered an antisemitic speech entitled 'The Jewish danger needs to be controlled' in Batavia on 5 April 1943.⁶⁵ Among other things, the United States and the United Kingdom were linked to that danger: 'The Jews, like everyone already knows, are behind the American president and behind premier Churchill, therefore they are always defending Jewish interests. Therefore, the Jews are also our enemies.'⁶⁶ At the end of a later version of the same speech, held on 10 April 1943, Mitsuo mentioned the substantial influence that Dutch Jews in Amsterdam would have had on the colonial system. He used this as a justification for fighting Jewish influence. There was also a strong undertone of nationalism in his speech: 'because we have been suppressed for centuries and because our wealth is taken up for the benefit of Jewish interests, who live under the guise of their Dutch citizenship in Amsterdam, which used to be the capital of the Netherlands. It is in Amsterdam, that the Dutch Jews have drafted and led all plans for the colonial measures.'⁶⁷

Despite the certainty expressed in the speech, the Japanese were not at all sure that the Germans were right about the 'Jewish danger'. According to the eyewitness report of dentist M. Knap, the Japanese began investigating themselves. In Knap's prisoner of war camp, ten Jews were told out of the blue to line up. Since the other prisoners thought this order was meant to be followed by some sort of punishment, they selected the ten youngest and strongest Jewish men, but then something unexpectedly happened: 'The Japanese sergeant walked in front of and behind the row a couple of times, looked at the heads and legs and walked away while shaking his head. He had a newspaper clipping from de 'Stürmer' (Nazi propaganda paper) with a Jewish caricature in his hand, and none of the ten had the prescribed crooked legs, crooked back, or crooked nose.'⁶⁸ This is a clear indication

64 Kowner, "The Japanese internment", 362-363.

65 Ibidem, 352.

66 NIOD, inv.no 4426 Stukken betreffende de behandeling en vervolging van Joden door de Japanse bezetter, 1943, 1962, z.d. Asia Raya, no.79, maandag 5 april 1943. 2^e jaargang.

67 NIOD, inv. number 4426 Stukken betreffende de behandeling en vervolging van Joden door de Japanse bezetter, 1943, 1962, z.d. Asia Raya, 2^e jrg, no.84, zaterdag 10 april 1943, 2.

68 NIOD, inv. number 4426 Stukken betreffende de behandeling en vervolging van Joden door de Japanse bezetter, 1943, 1962, z.d., 2.

that the German influence on Japanese policy was not decisive. According to A.G. Vromans, the internment of Jews 'for being of Jewish ancestry', must be regarded as an extreme concession that Tokyo granted their allies. There were no other measures taken against the Jews.⁶⁹

Hetty Wertheim-Gijse Weenink had already been interned for some time when the message came in September 1944 that all Jews had to register and go to the separate Jewish camp in Tangerang. This presented a huge dilemma for her as a non-Jewish woman: 'I myself do not have Jewish blood, but my children do. Imagine they take my children away and not me. So: either I register with my children, or I don't do anything at all. Most of my friends advise me: 'Do nothing, they won't find out, the Japs, they don't know Jewish names.' Yes, but we happen to be in a camp with German women (married to Dutchmen) and among them are untrustworthy ones who can betray me.'⁷⁰ In the end, she decided to register as Jewish and went to Tangerang with her three children. This camp did not turn out to be only for Jews but did possess a so-called *jodenhan* (Jewish department)⁷¹, which could indicate that Jews were treated differently. Her son, Hugo, discovered banana skins in the dustbins of the other departments in the camp while looking for food. The Jewish department did not receive any bananas. This could be seen as a sign of a harsher treatment for Jews. Such harsher treatment is also discernible in the notes made by A.G. Vromans from the end of the internment period about the removal of Jewish boys and girls from work and camp functions in Adek, another camp.⁷²

However, these are the only pieces of evidence I have found for Jews being treated differently from other internees, so a deliberate Japanese policy does not seem plausible. Elisabeth de Jong-Keesing, another internee, recalled that the Japanese did not take any special measures against the Jews, but still intended to separate them from the non-Jews by taking them first to Tangerang (the *jodenhan*) and then to Adek. She also refers to non-Jewish women such as Hetty Wertheim who registered as Jewish for the sake of their children, and because they were unaware of what was happening in Germany: 'our move must have been at the request of a Japanese ally. (..) Our Jewish group was very colourful. All Dutch women with a Jewish husband had also come forward and Jewish women with a non-Jewish husband.

69 NIOD, inv. number 5101: Monografie van A.G. Vromans, 54.

70 Wertheim and Wertheim Gijse Weenink, *Vier wendingen*, 274.

71 Touw, *Zwijgen uit solidariteit*, 28.

72 NIOD, inv. number 5101: Monografie van A.G. Vromans, 75.

Nobody denied it and nobody knew anything about the extermination camps in Germany.⁷³

The Iraqi Jews had their own barracks in Tangerang, which suggests a separate 'Eastern' treatment.⁷⁴ This suggestion is supported by the Dutch Jewish refugee, J. Glaser, who wrote in his memoirs that Iraqi Jews did not mingle with other Jews and that their women could not even speak English or Dutch.⁷⁵ This picture is confirmed by eye witness J. Hilfman-van Dam who also said that Iraqi Jews refused to mingle with them, 'because we weren't real Jews according to them'. She also related that they were rude, got other food than the non-Baghdadi Jews, and were better at smuggling food via the fence.⁷⁶ Betty Roos, who was born to a Dutch-Jewish family on Borneo, the Dutch East Indies, in 1937, described the camp in her autobiography. Writing from the subjective perspective of a child, she presents a bleak picture of European and Baghdadi Jewish worlds that seem quite far apart: 'The Jews lived with us. There is another room where scary people live with pitch black hair and white skin. They call them Iraqis.'⁷⁷

The separate status led to bad feelings about the Baghdadis and sometimes led to accusations by other camp residents, as reported by camp child Lydia Chagoll: 'If something disappeared, if something happened in the camp, the Iraqis were immediately blamed without hesitation. Racism was also done within our camps.' She also describes how the presence of Baghdadi Jews was unsettling for the Japanese: 'even the Japanese preferred to take a different street, and as if by chance they usually skipped the Iraqi barracks on their tour'.⁷⁸ The behaviour and physical appearance of the Baghdadis was especially confusing to the Japanese authorities. They were so different from the rest of the European camp residents. According to Chagoll: 'The Iraqis were not westerners, not Europeans, no whites. The Europeans, the white skins (*withuiden*) were worth their contempt, the Iraqis not.'⁷⁹ Therefore, after long negotiations and pleas from the Baghdadis, the Japanese even gave them permission for a kosher kitchen in their barracks. Chagoll wrote that the reason was their non-European status and adds that the Japanese

73 De Jong-Keesing, *Op de muur*, 122.

74 Touw, *Zwijgen uit solidariteit*, 28.

75 Glaser, "Joden in Nederlands-Indië", 29-32. This could have been an observation of one single eyewitness and no general rule.

76 NIOD, inv. number 4846 "Verslag van J. Hilfman-van Dam", 3.

77 Roos, *Bonsaikinderen*, 83.

78 Chagoll, *Buigen in Jappenkampen*, 110. Lydia Chagoll and her family had escaped Flanders in 1940. Via many detours, they had arrived in the Dutch East Indies.

79 Ibidem, 110.

could also have done this in order 'to bully the other whites' or because of a shortage of guards to restrain 'the rages of the Iraqis' or to thwart the Germans who are yet whites as well, or simply to have no *soesa* ('worries'). With hindsight Chagoll thinks that apart from religious motives, the wish for a kosher kitchen was also based on sheer survival: 'I am of the opinion that the Iraqis have insisted on a kosher kitchen because it was the only chance to process the smuggled food.'⁸⁰

Although from the end of 1944 Japanese hopes to win the war were declining, in March 1945 the Japanese started a final attack. The Japanese internment camps were not extermination camps. Nonetheless, the rumour about the 'Borneo-plan' spread like wildfire in the last weeks of the war. This plan was to exterminate any remaining Jews in the camps.⁸¹ The rumour appears in several eyewitness accounts. For example, in A.G. Vromans' monograph: 'Also in Adek (14 August 1945 here) the common spread rumour went about the forthcoming evacuation to Borneo whether or not for Jews only.'⁸² H.E. van Creveld also refers to this story although she adds that the historical correctness is not certain: 'As far as I have heard, the English who liberated us appear to have found plans which indicated that the intention was to release the Jews into the jungles of Borneo, where we would have eventually died.'⁸³ Lastly, Hetty Wertheim-Gijse Weenink also remembers the rumour and wrote down at the start of August 1945: 'Everywhere: "Have you heard? We are being deported again; they have already started registering, Jews separately."' No one says it, but many understand this is our end. No human survives a new transport in the condition we are in. And this would be overseas, to Borneo, it is whispered.'⁸⁴ Evidence of the Borneo plan has never been found.

Conclusion

In this article I have examined the experiences of European Jews during the Japanese occupation in the Dutch East Indies, between 1939 and 1945. My goal was to provide a multi-layered picture of their experiences by using ego documents. By comparing these sources with each other and with

⁸⁰ Ibidem, 111.

⁸¹ Somers and Schreuder, *Gestrand in Indië*, 58.

⁸² NIOD, inv. number 5101: Monografie van A.G. Vromans, 75

⁸³ NIOD, inv. number 7541, Creveld, H.E. van, 1987 joden: Bandoeng: Tjihapit; Batavia: Adek.

⁸⁴ Wertheim and Wertheim-Gijse Weenink, *Vier wendingen*, 283.

articles from newspapers and periodicals, we can understand more about how Jews interacted with each other. In addition, I was able to challenge the idea that the Japanese blindly followed German policies towards the Jews under their control. Historical reality was more complex. The Japanese implemented measures against Jews rather randomly, without a clear policy or plan. Especially near the end of the war, rumours were on the rise, but both Jewish and non-Jewish internees were regularly transported to other, usually larger camps, without any sign of a specifically harsher treatment of Jews.

Beginning in August 1943, all Jews were incarcerated, regardless of their nationality, but I have found hardly any indication that they were treated differently than other internees, except for small incidents in which there was no indication of particular Japanese intentions against the Jews. Also, the so-called 'Borneo Plan' to exterminate all camp residents was not specifically meant for Jews and, in any case, its existence has never been proven. More importantly, the Japanese seemed confused by the German pressure to 'do something about the Jews', which is exemplified by the telling eyewitness account of M. Knap about the 'inspection' of ten Jews, who did not resemble the Nazi caricature of a Jew with crooked legs and nose.

Another indication of Japanese uncertainty about the Jews was the separate wing for Baghdadi Jews in Camp Tangerang. They were viewed as 'the Asian other'. The Iraqi Jews even got a kosher kitchen. What happened could be characterised as a clash of commands: a German order to arrest all Jews which clashed with the Japanese order to remove every trace of Europeans from the street. In fact, this shows that the Japanese followed their own path regarding measures for Jews instead of strictly obeying German commands. Because of the rather haphazard implementation of anti-Jewish measures, they left a great deal of leeway for Jews to manoeuvre. This was especially true for the Baghdadi Jews, who were an unsettling surprise to the Japanese, as both Jews and Asians.

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