

The Ovenist

The story of a Birma Veteran

Captain Cornelis Stolp

“Lest we forget”

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“Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself.”

Desmond Tutu

Foreword

Even as a child, I dreamt of Australia. I cannot say exactly where that longing came from. Perhaps it was because my father's brother, Uncle Teun, emigrated there with his family in the 1950s, a step that, as a small boy, I regarded as nothing short of heroic. "I'll do that one day too," I once told my mother.

She smiled, but her eyes betrayed a different feeling. My mother was not strict, but she was someone who liked to keep a firm hold on her world, and therefore on me as well. "You can do that when I'm no longer here," she would say, pretending to make light of it. Yet beneath the joke there was always a tremor of seriousness.

The years passed. I was forty-seven when I married for the second time. In a pub, I met Joop, a charming and somewhat headstrong Amsterdammer with a sparkle in his eyes and a past that seemed larger than life itself. He was a former diamond cutter who, after the war, had gone in search of happiness on the other side of the world: Australia. That evening we talked as though we had known each other for years. When we said goodbye, he told me:

"Whenever you are in Australia, please be my guest."

Those words stayed with me. And so our honeymoon took us Down Under, to a country that felt both boundless and intimate. At Joop's home on the coast in Tweed Heads, I was surrounded by the scent of eucalyptus and the murmur of the ocean. It felt as though I had rediscovered a part of myself I had never known before. One evening, over wine and in the silences between our words, Joop said, "Why

don't you move here for good? My house is too big for one man.”

An invitation, spoken almost casually, that would change my life.

My mother, by then eighty-four, was not pleased. She played the card of how much she would miss me with great conviction. “I can't do without you,” she said. But when I reminded her that she had spent three months of every winter in Benidorm for the past twenty-five years, twenty-five times three months, seventy-five months, more than six years, she fell silent for a moment.

Then she smiled and said, “Go on, son. But come back now and then.”

And I went.

Everything sold. The suitcases zipped shut. Towards Joop, towards the unknown.

We shared a house, and in time the stories came too. One evening, Joop told me about his childhood and about the brutal years he had spent in a Japanese prison camp in Burma. His words were raw, at times almost unbelievable. And yet he spoke with a certain lightness, as though he were trying to turn his own past into an exciting adventure story, simply to make it bearable. Those stories stayed with me. They would not let me go. From time to time, I wrote down fragments of Joop's story, never knowing where to begin or where to end. Now, twenty-five years later, I felt the need to bring them together and commit them to paper. Not because I wanted to be a writer, but because I wanted to make something tangible from what he endured: his pain, his resilience and the quiet anger he sometimes carried towards his past.

This is my attempt to record what a person can endure and still remain standing. That is how this little book came into being: from memory, admiration and the realisation that some lives deserve not to be forgotten.

This story was written entirely by hand and from the heart. Modern tools were used during the finishing process solely to support the language, rhythm and readability. This is Joop's story. But perhaps, in a certain way, it is also mine.

Cees Stolp

(Readers' responses to the first edition prompted me to add a personal afterword at the end of this book. In it, I say something about how this story came into being, the questions readers asked me and the memories that did not always find a place in the book itself.)

Introduction

In the darkness of the Dutch East Indies during the Second World War, Joop and Hanneke were torn apart by the cruel hand of fate. The Japanese invaders deported Joop to one of their notorious camps deep in the Burmese jungle.

Desperately searching for a way to find her beloved, Hanneke was forced into hiding.

Years passed. The war ended... and liberation brought both hope and pain. Broken by the privations of the camps, Joop searched for a new beginning, but neither of them was in good health.

Joop and Hanneke had not so much recovered as been kept on their feet. Their bodies still wore the war like a second skin: thin, fragile and breathless after the slightest exertion. What they had endured had lodged itself in their bones, their lungs and their memories. Work was impossible; even walking was barely manageable. For the moment, living meant little more than holding on. A Swiss sanatorium might offer some improvement.

Davos offered no cure, merely a stay of collapse. The sanatorium stood high in the Swiss mountains, where the air was thin and the silence sometimes weighed more heavily than noise. Here, hope was administered through timetables, prescribed hours of rest and something that sounded almost alchemical: injections of gold. Slender needles carried a promise into the body, not a miracle cure, but one last attempt to halt the decline. The gold warmed

not only their veins, but also the thought that recovery might still be possible.

In a small hospital newsletter, they read an announcement that would once again alter the course of their lives.

Australia. A country in need of workers, offering victims of war the chance of a new existence. For ten pounds, little more than a token sum, one could make the voyage. Work was promised. Sunshine, space and distance from everything that had been destroyed.

The reconstruction of the Netherlands after the devastation of the Second World War was difficult and took many years. The country had been deeply scarred by occupation, bombing and fighting. Cities lay in ruins, infrastructure had been destroyed and countless families carried the loss of loved ones. Although the government set about rebuilding with determination, the scars of war remained visible in everyday life for a long time.

Alongside the physical destruction, the Netherlands faced persistent shortages. Food, clothing and everyday goods remained rationed for years. Life was defined by austerity and thrift. People learnt to improvise, reuse and share in order to keep their families afloat. Prosperity was a promise for another day; survival came first.

The problems were compounded by a severe housing shortage. Many homes had been destroyed, and new construction could barely keep pace with the rapidly growing population. The Netherlands reached ten million inhabitants, with the next million already on the way. Compared with other Western European countries, it felt increasingly crowded. For many, the future seemed claustrophobic and uncertain.

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that emigration was widely discussed and considered. Large families, the unemployed and farmers in particular saw little prospect in an overcrowded Netherlands. Emigration offered the possibility of space, work and security, a chance to begin again.

The Dutch government also recognised the seriousness of the situation.

For many, it remained no more than a possibility.

For a few, it became reality.

And for Joop and Hanneke, it was not policy or statistics, but one last chance to breathe.

Leaving the sanatorium

It was not a plan, but a reflex. A leap forwards because going back was impossible. The doctors warned them. Their bodies were not ready. The journey would be arduous and the uncertainty immense. But Joop and Hanneke had learnt that waiting could be more dangerous than acting. Those who remained lying down for too long risked being overtaken by their past.

They left against all better judgement.

With the prospect of a more hopeful future and government assistance, they could build a new life in faraway Australia. Even so, they set out for the sun-drenched expanses of the Outback with a mixture of hope and resentment.

What followed was no triumphant journey, but an ordeal.

The Swiss mountains did not serve as scenery; they became an adversary. Joop and Hanneke narrowly avoided falling into the hands of people smugglers hoping to profit from emigrants bound for Australia.

After a harrowing adventure, they finally reached Australia. They tried to build an ordinary life with the work and housing they had been offered, but memories of the war years in Japanese captivity began to return with increasing force. Seeking refuge in the rough mining town of Coober Pedy, they started a small metalworking and repair business. A smouldering desire for vengeance burned in Joop's soul, a fire that seemed to rise whenever he looked up at the stars above the desert at night.

One night, as they sat in their makeshift home among the hills of Coober Pedy, Joop had a strange idea. He would not remain an ordinary handyman. He built his own forge in the desert, shaping metal into sharp and deadly forms. Before long, he enlarged his shed with a great furnace, a chamber of fire. Hanneke saw the darkness in his eyes and knew he was planning something terrible.

In secret, Joop began hunting Japanese men who had come to Australia after the war to build new lives. One by one, they vanished in what appeared to be 'accidents' in the remote Outback. Within the South Australian police, rumours began to circulate about a ghost from the war, a shadow that struck at night with a blade heated in a furnace. Hanneke tried to stop him, but Joop was obsessed. "This is for what they did to us," he hissed as he sharpened his weapons in the glow of the forge. His thirst for vengeance consumed him completely. One night, with the moon hanging low above the hills, Joop went in search of the last Japanese man in the region, a man who had boasted of his deeds in the camps.

In a heart-stopping confrontation in the shadows of an abandoned mine shaft, Joop found his quarry. The fight was

brief but fierce. When Joop returned to their underground home, Hanneke was waiting for him with tears in her eyes. "Enough," she pleaded. But Joop had gone too far. He disappeared into the night, into the Outback, where the wind drowned out his cry for vengeance.

By morning, Joop was gone. Hanneke searched the desert for days, but found only a note in the forge: "Fire will cleanse the guilty." Her persistence was finally rewarded when she discovered Joop, emaciated, lying among the carcasses of animals that might have sustained him. In the end, his will to go on living for Hanneke proved decisive. Joop let his weapons fall and returned Hanneke's embrace. "For you," he whispered. "For us." Together they resolved to leave the memories of the war behind and build a new life in the Outback, where the sun might allow their love to shine once more.

Some say that on the hot nights of Coober Pedy, Joop's spirit still roams, an ovenist of vengeance, hunting shadows from the past. And that he and Hanneke still walk hand in hand through the desert, their love stronger than ever, tempered by the trial of fire they endured.

The discovery of a great opal, however, would prove to bring anything but peace.

Amsterdam, 1920-1940: A City Between Euphoria, Poverty and Gathering Threat

A city awakening from war (1918-1923)

When the First World War ended in 1918, the Netherlands had remained neutral, but Amsterdam had felt its consequences deeply. Food shortages, strikes, riots and poverty had left profound scars. Yet in the immediate aftermath of the war, an almost breathless sense of relief filled the streets, as though the city once again dared to reinvent itself.

Amsterdammers in the 1920s lived in a world that was cautiously becoming modern. New cinemas opened their doors, tram networks expanded and the first motorcars rattled through the narrow streets like strange metal beasts. People longed for entertainment and lightness. Cabarets, dance halls and theatres such as Carré and the Rembrandt Theatre enjoyed a golden age.

At the same time, Amsterdam remained unmistakably a city of social contrasts. Working-class families lived crowded together in small upstairs flats in the Jordaan, the Staatsliedenbuurt or the Eastern Docklands. The middle classes populated the neighbourhoods around Ferdinand Bolstraat, Haarlemmerdijk and the Rivierenbuurt. Those with money, diamond merchants, wealthy businessmen and successful entrepreneurs, resided in stately houses along Apollolaan or near Museumplein.

The city expanded at tremendous speed, and with that growth came a new kind of energy.

Amsterdam's own Roaring Twenties

Internationally, the 1920s became known as the Roaring Twenties: jazz, the Charleston and economic prosperity. Amsterdam had its own more modest version. At De Kring, the cultural elite danced to new American music, while throughout the neighbourhoods countless smoke-filled pubs rang with accordion music and tall tales.

To many young people, the age felt light and free.

Employment opportunities increased, women cautiously gained greater freedom and the cinema became the new popular entertainment. The Tuschinski Theatre, which opened in 1921, became the cathedral of this new era: glittering, exotic and dreamlike, a place where ordinary Amsterdammers could feel like citizens of the world for a little while.

Yet it was not all celebration. Poverty remained stubbornly entrenched. Many working-class families lived ten or more to a damp dwelling, where gaslight barely dispelled the shadows. City officials struggled with housing shortages, poor sanitation and diseases such as tuberculosis. But the construction of new districts, the garden villages in Amsterdam-Noord, the Indische Buurt and later the Rivierenbuurt, offered a glimpse of a better future.

The blow of the Depression (1930-1935)

The worldwide economic crisis of 1929 reached Amsterdam in the early 1930s with merciless slowness. Factories closed, shipping declined and the diamond industry, the pride of the city for centuries, almost completely collapsed. Around seventy per cent of diamond workers lost their jobs. The

blow fell particularly hard upon the Jewish community, which was strongly represented in the trade. Unemployment became a feature of the cityscape in its own right. Long queues formed at labour-relief offices. Men in caps, hands clasped behind their backs, trudged along Entrepotdok, through the Plantage or the Dapperbuurt in search of anything resembling work. Poor districts sank deeper into misery. Relief payments were slow and accompanied by humiliating inspections. Frustration was heard increasingly often in the working-class quarters, although humour, solidarity and music helped people hold on to one another. The city grew gloomier. There was less luxury in the shop windows, the cafés became quieter and newspaper headlines took on a more ominous tone. Even so, Amsterdammers remained stubborn optimists. "It'll all come right," people often said, though increasingly the words were followed by a sigh.

Neighbourhoods alive with culture

Despite the difficult times, Amsterdam's neighbourhoods continued to teem with life. The city was a mosaic of distinctive districts, each almost a village in itself.

The Jordaan:

A district filled with accordion music, pubs, market traders, poverty and warmth. Everyone knew everyone else, and on summer days the pavement became an extension of the sitting room.

The Jewish Quarter around Waterlooplein and Rapenburg:

A lively, densely populated district of traders, diamond workers, merchants and synagogues, with children racing through its narrow alleys. Yiddish cries, Dutch street slang and Hebrew prayers mingled to create a character found nowhere else in the city.

Zeedijk and the surrounding streets:

Rough, colourful and international. Full of sailors' pubs, opium dens, seamen and women of the night, but also rich in music and stories.

Nieuw-Zuid and the Apollobuurt:

Stylish, new and spacious. A place where architecture and modernity came together, a world away from the cramped districts elsewhere in the city.

This diversity made Amsterdam a city where opposites existed side by side: grand and humble, rich and poor, devout and free-spirited.

The gathering threat (1935-1940)

From the middle of the 1930s, the mood in Europe changed. Café conversations increasingly turned to Germany, Hitler, the measures being taken against Jews and rearmament. People in Amsterdam felt a growing unease, but clung to the belief that the Netherlands would remain neutral, just as it had during the previous war.

Yet the changes could be felt. Jewish refugees arrived from Germany.

Pale, exhausted and often destitute, they entered a city that welcomed them but was itself struggling with poverty.

The Dutch Nazi movement, the NSB, became increasingly visible, especially in districts with high unemployment.

Marching groups, pamphlets and tense confrontations in public squares became part of the cityscape.

The city authorities invested in football pitches, youth programmes and large public-works projects, partly in an effort to curb radicalisation.

But above all, a veil of nervousness hung over the city.

It was not always visible in the streets, but it could be heard in conversation... It felt as though something was drawing near.

When war broke out in Europe in September 1939, the Netherlands officially maintained its neutrality. Amsterdam, however, became quieter and more cautious. The city was blacked out at night. Air-raid shelters appeared. Newspapers filled with reports of war. Many Amsterdammers went about their days with a knot in their stomachs.

And still life carried on. Trams clanged through the streets. Markets remained open. In photographs of young couples in love, pigeons still gathered on Dam Square. People laughed, married, worked and made plans for the future.

Until that morning in May 1940, when the sound of German aircraft screamed the city awake and forced Amsterdam for ever onto a different course.

Amsterdam, 1925.

The scent of freshly ground coffee and the distant sound of a saxophone filled the narrow streets of the diamond district. Joop Poot walked beside the water with his friend Ben Cohen, their shadows stretching long in the evening light. They had just finished rehearsing with their little jazz band, and Joop's fingers still tingled with the last notes he had played. The saxophone felt like an extension of his own body, as though music were his true language.

Joop and Ben played together in a small jazz band. Joop had a natural feel for the saxophone. Because of his appearance, people often assumed that he was Jewish. He and Ben had been friends for years, and Ben's father was a diamond merchant in Amsterdam.

That connection apparently helped Joop secure an apprenticeship as a diamond cutter and a position with Ben's father. At some point, Joop had something to do with the Koh-i-Noor, or Kohinoor, the 109-carat diamond from India. Precisely what that involvement was, he preferred not to say.

Within his family, Joop had always felt different from his two brothers and his sister. During his medical examination for military service, he discovered that his instinct had not deceived him. His real surname was not Poot, but Zimmermann, something his mother had never told him. During the First World War, she had had a relationship with a German soldier. After he died in unexplained circumstances, she returned to the Netherlands and married Herman Jan Poot, with whom she had three more children.

Joop was deeply shocked that his mother had kept this from him and that he had been forced to discover the truth in such a manner. He later had the second 'n' removed from his surname.

In the armed forces, Joop underwent rigorous training with the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps. His brother Chris was already serving in the East Indies, where he conducted an army band. He had married a beautiful Indonesian woman on Java.

Just as Joop was called up to sail west with the navy and serve in the Dutch West Indies, a telegram arrived from Chris asking whether he could come to Indonesia. His wife's father had died, leaving behind a bicycle shop and a jewellery business. The bicycle shop could be sold, but Joop's experience with gemstones meant that the jewellery shop might offer him an excellent start.

Joop asked his military superiors to exchange his posting to the West Indies for one in the East. Permission was granted, and he left for a Dutch military camp on Java.

His military duties prevented Joop from running the jewellery shop full-time. Meanwhile, he began a relationship with a young woman from The Hague who worked for an aunt in a small paint and wallpaper shop. Hanneke was a strikingly charming Dutch presence among the beautiful, delicately built local women. Joop persuaded her to manage the jewellery business so that he could fulfil his military obligations. He had impressed the senior officers with his performance as a gunner aboard a Catalina, the versatile flying boat commonly known as a Cat. These aircraft carried out reconnaissance and convoy-protection flights, rescued

shipwrecked sailors and transported servicemen, their families and supplies.

A true Amsterdammer, Joop also made himself popular with his superiors' wives by occasionally bringing them a little something that glittered from the shop. He married Hanneke, and they made their home in the flat above the business.

The Dutch East Indies

A colony in apparent tranquillity

In 1935, the Dutch East Indies was still a tightly controlled colony.

Batavia, Surabaya and Bandung prospered on coffee, sugar, rubber, oil and tin. Europeans enjoyed a comfortable life of clubs, plantations and private societies. For the Indonesian population, life was very different: little political influence, low wages and a rigid hierarchy.

The nationalist movement was nevertheless growing.

Figures such as Sukarno were kept under close surveillance.

The colonial administration underestimated the depth of the desire for independence.

The threat came not only from within, but also from abroad: Japan was casting a hungry eye over Southeast Asia.

Japanese occupation

In March 1942, the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army surrendered. Japan occupied the archipelago with astonishing speed.

For Dutch and Indo-European civilians, internment followed: camps, hunger and forced labour.

At first, many Indonesians regarded Japan as a liberator, Asia for the Asians, but it soon became clear that this too was a brutal occupation.

The notorious Burma Railway cost tens of thousands of lives. In the East Indies themselves, countless others died through romusha forced labour, starvation and violence.

Japan armed and trained young Indonesians, inadvertently sowing the seeds of an independent national army.

Freedom and chaos (Bersiap)

Bersiap; the word means 'stand ready' and refers to the violent period in the former Dutch East Indies at the beginning of the Indonesian struggle for independence, immediately after the Japanese occupation.)

Stand ready

On 17 August 1945, Sukarno proclaimed independence.

But freedom did not come in an orderly fashion.

The Bersiap erupted. Revolutionary youths turned against everything associated with colonial rule: Dutch people, Indo-Europeans and Chinese.

Murder, looting and fear.

To many, it felt like utter disintegration. The world that had existed before the war was gone.

The 'police actions'

The Netherlands attempted to restore the colony through two military campaigns, euphemistically called 'police actions'.

International criticism mounted. The United States and the United Nations applied pressure.

Moral authority had vanished. The empire was too weary, too poor and too late.

The end of an era

In 1949, the Netherlands recognised Indonesian independence.

In 1950, the Dutch East Indies ceased to exist for good.

Hundreds of thousands of people departed for the Netherlands, Australia and elsewhere.

They carried with them memories of tropical sunlight, war, loss, loyalty and broken promises.

The years 1935-1950 marked the passage from a self-assured colony to an independent nation, through war, occupation, violence and farewell.