



'Lampersari'

Memories of life in a Japanese concentration camp on Java during World War 2

By Gon Boissevain and Lennie van Empel

Original language Dutch: Translation by Nick Walker (Dutch & Such)

Prologue

A deluge of memories floods my mind, while reading Lennie's diary. Memories of hunger, illness, fear, overcrowded spaces and above all the feeling of being buried alive; completely devoid of news from loved ones, totally dependent on rumours as a source of information about the war and developments in the world, and incapable of doing anything about it at all.

Lennie's diary has become an historical document; a record of our daily lives in the camp. It describes our anxiety, our longing for our husbands and our sadness over the children who were growing up without their fathers. Later came the fear of being transported and our confusion over the Nippon orders, the terrible and constant hunger and our struggle simply to keep going.

Not every moment of camp life was tragic though. The diary also records better times, especially during our first year, when there was still enough food to go round. A time when we still had the privacy and luxury of a house, or at least a room to ourselves. There are also stories of birthdays, celebrated with much more intensity than before, everyone making an effort to contribute with home-made presents, crafted from bits of cloth or scraps of wool. Times when a 'party dish' was improvised with the last tin from our stock and mixed with a few rations of rice or flour and we would momentarily forget being the downtrodden and worn-out women of Lampersari.

As good fortune would have it, Lennie and I never had to face the horrors of transportation and stayed in Lampersari throughout the duration of the war. Had this not been the case, Lennie's diary would have probably been lost and this book may never have been written.

More or less by chance, we ended up in a permanent camp, in which an increasing number of people from other camps were packed. As the numbers grew and the food supplies diminished, so the quality of life deteriorated and by the end of the war many of us had died of starvation.

Originally I had intended to write an account of my experiences in Lampersari Camp, using Lennie's diary merely as a point of reference. However, the diary expresses the atmosphere of the camp and our feelings at the time with such clarity, that I decided to change my approach and I have simply worked my memories around the entries from Lennie's diary, like adding beads to a necklace.

You have in your hands the chronicle of two women who survived a Japanese concentration camp during The Second World War. A detailed account of two people's lives in a world of narrowing horizons. An outlook, which didn't stretch much further than food and survival, a small group of friends and family members, and for the lucky few the occasional sign of life from their husbands and the most important radio messages. Our account is subjective and no doubt other women from the same camp will have had completely different memories of their time spent in Lampersari. In any case, it's an honest account of the atmosphere in the camp and a faithful attempt to capture our feelings at the time.

Gon Boissevain

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Chapter One

Prelude

In November 1939, when World War II had already broken out, but had not yet reached The Netherlands, Eddie and I left Amsterdam on our honeymoon. We travelled via the United States, Hawaii and New Zealand to our final destination; the island of Java in the Dutch East Indies, where my husband had already spent over six years working for a trading company.

As we set off on our journey I had mixed feelings. Joy mingled with sadness at leaving home. Fear of mines and submarines simply fuelled my apprehension and uncertainty about a new life in the tropics, which lay ahead of me. Yet stronger than any of these ominous premonitions was my feeling of excitement at the prospect of embarking on a fairy-tale voyage with my husband.

We arrived in Semarang on the Northern coast of Java in April 1940. Our first view was of the harbour and the lower town with its warehouses, offices, banks, law firms and estate agents. Further in the distance we saw the narrow streets of the Chinese quarter; shops and craftsmen's workshops set against a background of green hills. A road ran along the Sompok area, where the lower-ranking officials and office clerks lived in small houses. This area was to stage the scene of the many horrors, which awaited us. Further on, the road climbed up to old Tjandi with its shady lanes and the stately 'Indian' style houses of the more affluent Europeans, where, in the large rooms and on the wide marble porches, it was always pleasantly cool, despite the tropical heat.

At first Eddie and I stayed with Frans and Louca van Houten in their distinguished house on the Kenarilaan. Frans was a senior partner in a law firm. The slender, elegant Louca, our kind hostess and dear friend, was the hub around which life in their house revolved. During our stay with her we became acquainted with Arie and Lennie van Empel, who had arrived in Semarang during February 1939. Arie had completed his law studies in Leiden and worked as a junior in Frans's law firm. Lennie and I liked each other from the first moment we met and an increasingly solid friendship also developed between the men.

Louca taught Lennie and I so many things. We were both in awe of the way in which she managed a large household of staff: two house-boys, two laundry maids, a cook, two gardeners, a chauffeur and a school mistress for her daughters Caroline and Elsje.

Frans helped us to find a house not far from Old Tjandi. This was the beginning of an idyllic but brief period, from which we awoke painfully with news of the German invasion of The Netherlands. Contact with friends and relatives in our homeland was abruptly cut off and fear for their safety cast a dark shadow over our lives. As we could no longer receive letters from the home front, Lennie was prompted to start writing a diary.

For a year and a half, until December 1941, and surrounded by a huge population of Asians, we were continuously reminded of our isolated position as Europeans living in the 'Emerald Belt' on the island of Java.

At first it was very difficult to communicate with our servants as we spoke little or no Malay. The men usually left for the office at half past seven in the morning and worked until at least four thirty in the afternoon. After work they played golf or tennis, followed by a refreshing mandi, a bath created by pouring cool water down your back from a small bucket. After a light evening meal we would sit outside for a while savouring the mysteriously still tropical night before going to bed. As we could no longer receive letters from the home front, Lennie was prompted to start writing a diary. For a year and a half, until December 1941, and surrounded by a huge population of Asians, we were continuously reminded of our isolated position as Europeans living on Java, one of the 'Emerald Belt' of Indonesian islands.

Lennie and I became very close, especially since we were both pregnant, she was expecting Martijn and I Romée. The island was a paradise of lush vegetation, everything grew in abundance. Lennie made the mistake of planting marigolds at the front of her flowerbed and they grew to an incredible five feet tall. In the evenings, while we played bridge, we would look out from Old Tjandi across Sompok and see the lights of the harbour. Behind us, even further up the mountainside, we could see the beautiful holiday resort of Kopeng.

Such was the prelude to my life, a blissful youth and a blossoming two years of marriage: a foundation, which made it possible to endure what the future had in store. Then, out of the blue, Japanese fighter planes soared over the American fleet in Pearl Harbour. The time had come.

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