

A festive massacre (by: Hans Vervoort, translated from Dutch by Willem ten Wolde)

"Homesickness is: knowing the way in a house that no longer exists," is one of the most beautiful statements by writer Rudy Kousbroek (**Pematang Siantar** 1929 - Leiden 2010). A nostalgia trip to Sumatra he undertook in 1979 and later - with a television crew in his wake - again in 1994. He wrote a book about it: *Back to Negri Pan Erkoms. (Terug naar Negri Pan Erkoms.)*

When my wife and I traveled around that island in 2004, I visited some of Kousbroek's nostalgic sites. One was the hotel Siantar in Pematangsiantar, the third largest city of Sumatra, three hours drive from the capital city of Medan. Kousbroek stayed there from his 6th to 10th year at a boarding school that he hated, because near the plantation where his father worked was not a primary school. "Finally home," he noted as he returned to the hotel during his search for Negri Pan Erkoms. He had pleasant and glowing birthday memories about the beautiful dining room:

"The panels along the wall, the curved windows, the hallway to the kitchen. The tiles, the tiles. An indescribable feeling (...) of being in a familiar environment, finally after so many years. "

After some searching I found that dining room, even in 2004 a nice place. I described Kousbroek's 'aha Erlebnis' in my travel book *Return to the Tropics. (Retourtje Tropen (2005).)*

And I was shocked when I received an angry mail from a reader this year. She wrote that Kousbroek (and therefore also myself) could never have been in the original dining room. Because on October 15, 1945, a bloody massacre took place in which not only the hotel burned down, but also the Swiss owner, a few Dutch guests, two Dutch soldiers and a few dozen Ambonese and Menadonese were massacred by inflamed Indonesians.

One of the victims was her father-in-law, the planter J. C. Groenberg.

After some research it appeared that she was right. The newspaper *The Algemeen Handelsblad* of November 21, 1945, reported extensively about the incident, and I also found journals and various historical studies in which it was mentioned.

But why did not Kousbroek know that? The hotel was later restored as good as possible in the old state, but during his nostalgic stay someone could have told him what previously had happened at this place? Kousbroek spoke to the manager of the hotel, an old faithful, and recalled pre-war memories with him. But apparently the fire of 1945 did not come up during the conversation. Kousbroek himself (17 years old) left for the Netherlands in the beginning of 1946 by MS Noordam from Sumatra with his parents and should therefore have known about the massacre that took place before his departure in the so-called 'Bersiap' period. The more so because his father - himself an administrator of a company - must have known Groenberg and the Kousbroek family had regularly been a guest at that hotel.

Bersiap

What did the Bersiap mean? The word means "be prepared," a statement from Sukarno.

After the declaration of independence of the Republik Indonesia, the young government of Sukarno and Hatta did not actually have any means of exercising authority. The English liberators stopped the return of Dutch soldiers from Japanese captivity for as long as possible for political reasons, but had occupied and controlled only a few parts of Java and Sumatra.

In the power vacuum that arose in many areas after the capitulation of Japan (15 August 1945), fanatical youth bands (called Pemudas, meaning 'young') set out to kill as many whites and half-whites as possible with klewangs (machete's) and spears. 'Death to all whites' (Bunuh belanda) was the slogan.

This period of murder and robbery lasted from October 1945 to March 1946 and did cost thousands of lives. Especially Indo-Europeans who were permitted to stay outside the internment camps of the Japanese. They were regarded as pro-Dutch by the Pemuda's and been declared outlaws. Because the able-bodied men were often still prisoners of war in the camps, they - women, children, older men - could not protect themselves against the violence. The white interned women and children

and older men were safer: they stayed in the Japanese camps, where the Japanese camp guards had now been ordered by the British liberator to protect them from nationalistic violence. On Sumatra they were housed in the district of Polonia, which became very overpopulated with about 15,000 ex-internees.

A few took the risk and went back - usually out of a sense of duty - to their place of residence. With often fatal consequences.

And that was also the case here.

Hotel Siantar

The Japanese respected the neutrality of Switzerland and Swiss citizens in the Dutch East Indies so they were free people during the war. Hotel Siantar was owned by such a Swiss, Heinrich Suerbeck. He was a chemist and botanist with great interest in tropical plants.

In 1916 he founded the first soft drink factory of the Dutch East Indies and Indonesia, which sold very popular drinks under the brand Badak (= rhinoceros), with sarsaparilla as topper. In 2016 the factory, now in Indonesian possession, celebrated its 100th anniversary. Earlier, in 1912, he had build the hotel Siantar and made it successful.

During the war he and his two daughters stayed free, just like three other Swiss, A. Bauer (Sürbeck's garden employee) H. Boner (machinist) and R.W. Schuepp (administrator of the palm oil company Dolok Sinoembah), who had sought safety in hotel Siantar.

During the war years they - and especially the two daughters - did their best to smuggle food into Siantar's prison. There, 500 internees who stayed in miserable conditions and under the whip of the sadistic commander Nisjiuro Gyozo who was sentenced and executed after the war. Their daily ration consisted of 50 grams of rice, so it is no wonder that half of the prisoners did not survive the war and died of hunger, disease or violence.

The sisters Lydia and Hedwig Sürbeck received the Resistance Star East Asia for their good deeds in 1950 and 1951.

Hedwig Sürbeck was the lover of J.C. Groenenberg, a cousin of prewar Dutch Prime Minister Colijn and on Sumatra an authoritative man because of his position as administrator of the Dutch Indisch Land Syndicate. Groenenberg was married, but his wife lived in the Netherlands and there was no divorce possible because of their Calvinist Protestant background.

Everyone knew that Hedwig and he had a relationship, so it was not surprising that he rushed to his beloved in Siantar immediately after the capitulation of Japan.

That Hotel Siantar was Swiss owned certainly played a role in his decision that it would be a safe place. Others who were in the hotel at that time were the doctor E.R.J. Boers and his wife.

"Doctor Boers was very much loved by the population and was nicknamed bapak Simeloenggoen (father of the people of Simeloenggoen). When he was in the camp, there was prayer in the mosques every Friday night for his well-being. After the Japanese capitulation, he left the camp at the request of the population." (Quotation from the journal of the surgeon A. H. Smook)

But by doing that, he signed the life of himself and his wife away. The hotel also accommodated 4 servicemen in Dutch service, an Indo-European and three Ambonese. Presumably a small delegation of the Rapwi-corps (Recovery of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees) that was created by the Dutchman C.A.M. Brondgeest to bring as many interned Dutchmen to safety in Medan as quickly as possible.

The leader of this group - Ensign Claessens - had asked the English in Medan for reinforcement, because he saw that disturbances would arise. In the absence of an answer, he drove to Medan to once again insist on the English in person, unintentionally saving his own life.

A rumor

Until 13 October 1945 - after the proclamation of the republic - the relationship between the Sumatran people and the 'belanda's' (literally 'whites', but in Indonesia the indication for Dutch) was hostile, but not violent. But then a rumor suddenly circulated:

in front of a hotel in Medan, in the Jalan Bali, a Dutch soldier had pulled the red and white emblem (colors of the Indonesian flag) of a school child's uniform and stepped on it. To date, this story in Indonesian historiography is being mentioned as the beginning of a heroic uprising against the oppressor.

Whether it ever happened is doubtful, but the rumor did its job and soon also reached Siantar. And led to the assembly of a large crowd of Bataks for the local hotel: hotel Siantar.

The hotel was surrounded by a few houses, 2 of which were inhabited and guarded by Japanese soldiers. They stayed out of all these disturbances. In addition to those Japanese residences, some houses had been emptied for temporary accommodation - awaiting transport to Medan - for a few dozen of the Ambonese and Menadonese, ex-servicemen who had been released from prison and were weak and exhausted. They were previously threatened by the Bataks and had sought refuge in the hotel.

The Batak mob was led by a well-bespoken Aceher. But the administrator of the hotel also turned out to be the instigator of violence. He was a protégé of Suerbeck and was educated at the Dutch highschool system, HBS, at Suerbeck's expense. But he was radicalized during the Japanese occupation and now detested his benefactor.

The crowd grew to more than a thousand men, Batakkers and Acehers. They demanded that the Ambonese and Menadonese be surrendered to them. The Swiss Mr. Bauer stepped outside and tried to explain that the hotel was Swiss, a neutral place, and that there was no question of surrendering guests to the crowd.

They listened to him and suddenly there was a shot that hit Bauer in the head. He immediately fell to the ground. That was the signal for the raging crowd. The hotel was set on fire with Molotov cocktails. Then they entered and ransacked room after room and the guests were tjingtjanged (chopped into pieces with klewangs or machetes).

Then the looting began. Photographs taken after the violence show empty spaces.

Of the three soldiers, one (Ishaaq) survived the violence by playing dead, of the Ambonese and Menadonese a few dozen escaped, but at least 20 of them were murdered by the crowd. Both Boers and the Swiss Boner and Bauer did not survive either.

Tjingtjang

With the two other Swiss, namely hotel owner Sürbeck and planter Schuepp, the leaders of the crowd had special game plans.

A century earlier the linguist Van der Tuuk had to flee from Batak country because he heard that there were plans to consume him. Bataks were then men-eaters.

On 15 October 1945 they did it again. Sürbeck and Schuepp were especially brought to prison, where they (one after the other) were used as sacrificial animals.

Smook, the surgeon who had dared to restart his practice in Laras (a town near Siantar), was arrested on 16 October and taken to prison, where he shared a one-person cell with five others. Including the son of Schuepp. He later wrote about it in his diary:

"We were obviously not in an enviable position. Thousands of Bataks had gathered around the prison and roared tirelessly: Boenoeh Belanda (murder the Dutch). I do not know how we got through the night! Outside the Bataks prison and in the main building there seemed to be a big party going on. Later we heard that the father of the Swiss boy was tjingtjanged during this party. That means being cut into pieces and still being alive while the bystanders were drinking their blood. The previous day that happened to Mr. Sürbeck, imagine, under the direction of the young man he had been giving the opportunity to study for free. It was awful! (...) There was a Javanese, a somewhat older man, who did not agree with the course of affairs for some time and who told me

that tomorrow it would be my turn to be the daily murder victim. "

Fortunately for Smook, the rescue was near: at last a group of British soldiers had arrived.

Smook: "*And then this nasty thing happened: the murderers of Sürbeck and the others begged us to say that they had treated us well and that we were not mad at them! I thought that was a letdown. "* And there was another turnoff. "*The next morning we took the Aceher who was suspected of the murder of Doctor Boers with us and surrendered him to the British forces who set him free. He was sitting on a truck like a champion. According to the English commander, handling it this way was correct, as long as his guilt was not proven, he was a free man. "*

A festive commemoration

The story told here is based on reasonably reliable Dutch sources and I think it reflects the facts. Some of the women and children who stayed at the hotel were taken to a nearby school and freed a few days later by the English. Among them are the daughters of Sürbeck, the son of Boner and an Indo (Dutch-Indonesian) mother (named Tellings) with a child.

Boner junior, the surviving soldier Ishaq and one of the daughters Sürbeck issued a statement in Medan to the English with a detailed account of what had happened. The Indonesian version deviates strongly from this.

On Sumatra, in October 1946 and in the years after, the fact is remembered in Siantar that during that month the population in 1945 gloriously put an end to a great grievance. Their story: at the hotel Siantar a Dutch KNIL army unit of several dozen soldiers was present who behaved defiantly, hoisted the Dutch red-white-blue flag, waving their arms and holding parades. Until the population tired of it and they made an end of this part of colonial domination with great courage and decisiveness. Because since 17 August of that year, Indonesia existed!

The fact that some Swiss and Dutch citizens and dozens of Menadonese and Ambonese were also murdered are mentioned in the Indonesian stories, but not condemned: you can not make an omelette without breaking eggs. Too bad!

History is written by the victors and in Indonesian history there is no place for crimes committed by the patriots against Westerners and pro-Dutch Ambonese and Menadonese.

Let alone robbery and looting and cannibalism.

A few weeks ago, historical research started on what happened in the period 1945-1949, both from the Dutch and Indonesian side. I wonder if that will lead to any adjustment of the Indonesian glorious version of what was probably no more than a massacre with the intentions of robbing and looting.

Hans Vervoort

Sources:

H. Bussemaker *Bersiap! Rebellion in paradise* (Walburg Pers, 2005)

J.J. Van de Velde *Letters from Sumatra* (T. Wever, 1982)

B. Oudenhoven *North Sumatra in wartime* (Makkum, 2001)

Ronald Spector *In the ruins of empire* (Tantor Media 2007)

R. Kousbroek *Back to Negri Pan Erkoms*

San Sridayanti Purba *Persepsi masyarakat terhadap peristiwa Siantar Hotel October 15, 1945*

(The public perception of what happened in the Siantar Hotel takes place on 15 October 1945)

Thesis published by Fakultas Ilmu Sosial Universitas Negeri Medan (2012)

The *Algemeen Handelsblad* of 21-11-1945 and various other newspapers.

Siantar report Statement made by Miss Sürbeck, Mr Boner (jr) and Mr (unreadable) to the English commander dated 19-8-1945 in Medan (the date is a typing error, must be 19-10-1945)

On the following pages the statement made on 19 October 1945 and a number of photos

Sisatar Report.

Medan, 19-8-1945

Confirmed by
Miss Surbeck, Mr. Boser (Jr.), Mr. Ishaan.

At about 12.00 hours an Ambonese (Lilipali) went from the Sisatar Hotel to the Ambonese and Mandanese quarters. He found some Indonesians weaponed with swords and spears, walking around the house. He told them to go away and when they refused to go, he shot twice in the air. The people ran away and the Ambonese went back to the hotel.

Mr. Boser in the meantime received information from a Chinese that the Indonesians were going to attack the hotel.

After dinner at about 12.00 hours while the hotel people were drinking coffee in the front of the hotel a motor-lorry loaded with Indonesians all weaponed with spears came up to the hotel. Mr. Bauer had a talk with Poerba the Indonesian Resident of Sisatar. Poerba wanted the Ambonese and Mandanese; he didn't get them. Immediately the Japanese guards, so all together under command of Second Lt. Yamada came to stop the Indonesians and told Mr. Bauer that the people all should go to their rooms; their safety would be guaranteed by them.

The people did go to their rooms except some Ambonese and Gunther the Eurasian sergeant. The Indonesians tried to get in to the hotel; more and more natives were coming. Mr. Bauer saw the Jap. Lt. about it and told him to send them away. The people didn't care about the Japanese guards. Bauer asked the Japanese Lt. why he did not shoot at the crowd. The Lt. said that, before he could shoot, he first had to get permission of Colonel Grills. And when Bauer asked where the colonel was they told him that he was ill.

After all the Jap. could not hold it and the people broke into the hotel; this happened about 15.00 hours. The hotel people were waiting in one of the rooms at the back side, except Dr. Boser and his wife they were in their own apartments and had their door locked. At the back side of the hotel there also was a crowd practically the whole place was surrounded by the Indonesians. Mr. Bauer again tried to speak to the natives and asked for the leader. There was no leader, the only answer he got was "Kill them". It was no use to talk to these people. The Japanese guards at this side of the hotel did not even try to stop the people. The natives started with the right wing of the hotel, there were Dr. Boser and his wife stayed.

They first put on fire the servant quarters and storeplace. They broke into the Doctor's room and killed both people inside. Next on their program was the other wing; Bauer, Boser, Greenberg had pistols and Ishaan who was with them had a carabin. The Indonesians first tried to force the outside bath-room-door and made a big hole in it through which they threw bottles with petrol, they were trying to burn out the people inside.

The Indonesians did not quite succeed and a few got killed. The crowd was yelling kill them. Still the Japs didn't do a thing. Somebody with a rifle most probably a police-man was firing from some place of the Station Store room.

At about 17.00 hours Mr. Bauer once again tried to speak to the crowd. He told them that all people would surrender. While he said so he was standing with his hands up. The man with the rifle hit him right in his forehead. Three of them were killed now and everything was in fire. A hand-grenate was thrown at the hotel people.

At 19.00 hours Mr. Boser (Mr.) put out a white flag. This time the people seemed to accept surrender. They called Mr. Boser to come forward and all his people had to throw away their weapons. When Boser stood in front the Indonesians threw a bottle of petrol at him. The fire hit his face and some other parts of the body. "Kill them, cut them into pieces" a.s.o.

A second time Boser tried to come forward, also the crowd, who knew that the people had no more weapons, came nearer. They wanted to kill everybody with their knives and spears. Some natives former policemen came to defend the people with their swords. They were brought to the front of the hotel through a terrible crowd, that was yelling at them. In the front the Japanese guards were sitting with some Indonesians and had a jolly good time when they saw the hotel people.

The hotel people were brought to the Indonesian H.Q. ^{fixed} on arms and legs. There already were some Dutch people like Dr. Goenaling, his wife and children and some Ambonese and Meadonese people; men and women were separated and they started more or less third degree interrogation. Hereby the Indonesians killed Mr. Boser by stabbing him many times in his stomach and chest.

The same happened to Mr. Grossenberg, but Mr. Surbeck and Schuep were led away probably to Kampong Djawa both still are missing. The women and children were brought over to a school in which one of the women heard the Indonesians talking about 3 drums of petrol which the Japs had given to them to put the hotel in fire. The people were kept for three days, then the British came and brought them back to Medan.

The other Dutchman Dr. van der Hoken also is still missing, he is in Labohan Rokhoe jail.

1. The message about the festive commemoration in 1946

Nieuwe courant
24-09-1946 ©



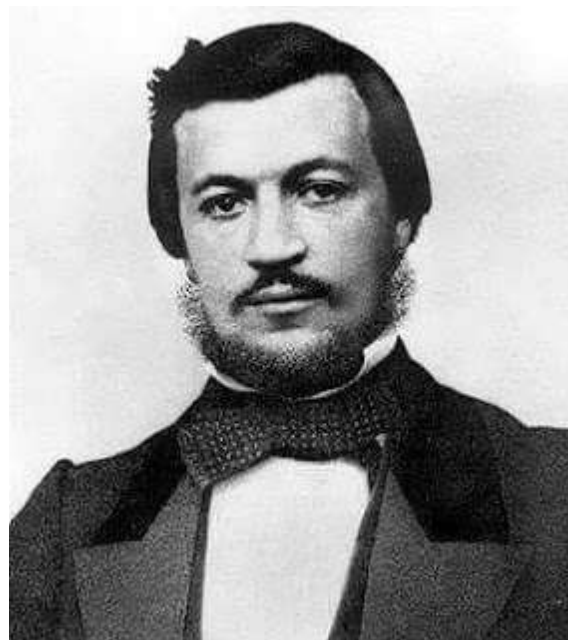
2. Hotel Siantar after the fire



3. The dining room that Kousbroek thought to recognize ("the tiles, the tiles") in 2004



4. Photo of Heinrich Sürbeck (1876 – 1945), owner of hotel Siantar



5. Photo of J.C. Groenberg

