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Navigating between connections and controversies

A different perspective on life under the Japanese occupation

On August 15, it will be more than eighty years since the Japanese occupation and the War in the Pacific officially came to an end. For many, its memory remains fraught. During the state visit of the Japanese emperor last June, the heads of state highlighted the centuries-old friendship between the Netherlands and Japan. Both King Willem-Alexander and Emperor Naruhito briefly addressed the occupation of the former Dutch East Indies and the suffering it caused. The emperor referred to the people *“who to this day carry with them the pain of that era.”* The king highlighted the deep wounds inflicted during that painful episode of the Second World War, which continue to resonate across subsequent generations. In doing so, both signaled an acknowledgment of the profound impact this experience had on people's lives.

The clear differences between the responses to this latest state visit and those in 1971 and 2000 show that the bitterness surrounding the atrocities is gradually fading into the background. Although the decades-old image of the enemy persists, there is growing room for narratives marked by greater complexity and nuance. While for many former residents of colonial Indonesia it was self-evident that their 'departure from paradise' was due to the Japanese occupation, subsequent generations are increasingly recognizing the centuries of colonial oppression that preceded it. Meanwhile, there also seems to be more space to acknowledge diverging experiences during the occupation. However, that the dominant narrative remained one of natural animosity for years is understandable. Many who maintained friendly ties with Japanese individuals during the war benefited from a uniform narrative dominated by aversion and detachment. Furthermore, there was hardly any room for reflection, as the war of independence broke out shortly after the declaration of the Republic of Indonesia on August 17, 1945.

After the war, stories about more or less friendly, even intimate, connections between Dutch people and Japanese individuals were swept under the rug as quickly as possible. This went so far that many children born from relationships between Japanese men and Dutch women only learned who their father was very late in life. That Japanese-Dutch contacts during the occupation were more nuanced and complex than was often assumed

is actually quite obvious. Even in wartime, ordinary life often recovers to a certain extent after the initial shock. And these new circumstances can sometimes offer opportunities. Marie-Thérèse was a prime example of this.



Before I delve deeper into the relationship between Marie-Thérèse Brandenburg van Oltse-Geysens, originally from Belgium, and the Japanese Minoru Sakata, I would like to briefly discuss how the protagonists shaped their lives in the primary sources. When people describe their lives, whether orally or in writing, they always present a particular version of reality. Biographical texts do not primarily describe facts, but rather how the authors experienced those facts. The way people remember the exact same event also varies from person to person. Statements made by individuals to intelligence services like NEFIS regarding other people's wartime behavior are, naturally, often personally biased. Moreover, not everyone was convinced of the value of those statements. Handwritten notes in the margins of the archives reveal questions raised about what was reported, sometimes even dismissing it as nonsense.

Only a limited number of personal letters and postcards from the war belonging to Marie-Thérèse and Minoru have been preserved. Although other written records describing their lives survived, these were almost always created for a specific purpose, such as police reports. A more balanced interpretation of the connection between Minoru and Marie-Thérèse only became possible when I gained access to the Sakata family's private archive, which contained contemporary sources that cast a different light on their relationship. Nevertheless, there are still loose ends.

By examining a single case study in depth from multiple perspectives, I can effectively demonstrate the diversity of local daily life. The connection between Marie-Thérèse and Minoru is tied to colonial history and the Japanese occupation of Indonesia. Marie-Thérèse was born in Leuven in 1893, the daughter of a day labourer. In the spring of 1917, she managed to leave Brussels to marry Frederik Brandenburg van Oltse-Geysens, who was rooted in the Dutch East Indies, in Amsterdam. How she managed to do so remains unclear. Leaving German-occupied Brussels was certainly no easy task. What is clear in any case is that Marie-Thérèse managed to transcend her background in an impressive manner. In 1921, the couple departed for Java, where Frederik was born and where, in 1929, he succeeded his father as director of the Pasir Nangka tea estate in West Java. Once in Java, the couple quickly joined the colonial elite.

That changed abruptly in May 1940 following the German invasion of the Netherlands. On May 12, Frederik was arrested on



suspicion of pro-German sympathies and membership in the NSB (National Socialist Movement), followed by his wife a day later. Since the mid-1930s and following the visit of Ir. Mussert to the Dutch East Indies, that party had gained increasing popularity there. Mussert was even received by Governor-General De Jonge, and many dignitaries attended the meetings. The report on Frederik's arrest that appeared in the East Indies press made it clear that he had enemies in Java:

"... the 'Grand Seigneur' of Batavia, director of 'Pasir Nangka,' who spent part of the money earned by his managers from the Tea and Cinchona estate on his criminal hobby of funding the Bandung scandal sheet 'Het Licht,' was taken today from his beautiful home on Raden Saleh and will be interned." According to Marie-Thérèse, Frederik owed those enemies primarily to his temporary directorship of the Aneta news agency following the unexpected death of founder and director Dominique Berretty in the crash of *De Uiver* in 1934.

Due to the internment, Brandenburg van Oltse's assets were left unattended. He empowered Sibeijn, a proxy holder at Pasir Nangka, to do whatever was necessary on his behalf to keep the company running. Soon, however, it became clear that state attorney Mr. Borgman Brouwer, one of the commissioners of Pasir Nangka, wanted to become director himself. Until that point, the couple had considered him a good friend. Borgman Brouwer became a member of the Committee for Legal Transactions in Wartime. On June 14, 1940, Frederik received a letter stating that he had been dismissed as director and that all functions and rights of Pasir Nangka were being taken over by the Committee. Frederik did not take this lying down and wrote lengthy documents from prison to protest. Borgman Brouwer ultimately became acting director anyway.

In September 1941, Frederik was released because he was terminally ill; he died shortly thereafter in the Military Hospital in Magelang. Marie-Thérèse was convinced that her husband had been murdered. She was also released because it was questionable *"... whether she posed a danger only as long as she was by her husband's side."* As would later be seen, that turned out to be a miscalculation. Marie-Thérèse took swift action, immediately mobilizing her colonial network. She was taken in by P.J.A. Idenburg, a good friend of the couple, who was at that time the director of the cabinet of Governor-General Jonkheer A.W.L. Tjarda van Starkenborgh Stachouwer.

This caused quite a stir in 'Batavian society.' On October 20, 1941, the *Soerabaijsch Handelsblad* published a lengthy article that left nothing to the imagination, titled: *"People are talking about: The Brandenburg case and the Idenburg case. The only possible consequence of demonstrated friendship."* The gist was that Idenburg, given his position, should never have offered

shelter to a traitor, and that he would do well to voluntarily step down from his service to the governor-general. Idenburg did not do so. However, by sheltering her, he ultimately ruined his chances of ever becoming Minister of Colonies.



The status Marie-Thérèse held at the time of her release was interpreted ambiguously. She viewed her own and Frederik's release as proof that the authorities had finally come to their senses and recognized their mistake. The prosecutor general made it clear, however, that while Marie-Thérèse was no longer interned, she had not been set free and certainly had not been rehabilitated. The authorities ordered her immediate departure from Batavia. She was required to stay at Hotel Kalimantan in Salatiga, where she could receive limited visitors and was placed under constant surveillance. The uproar caused at the center of power had to be quelled as quickly as possible.

Only with the Japanese invasion a few months later was Marie-Thérèse able to take matters back into her own hands. She did so, as usual, with gusto. As early as April 6, 1942, she stood outside the—unfortunately locked—doors of her villa. Driven by the humiliation she felt she had suffered through her internment, she did everything in her power to move back into Raden Salehlaan 47. Surprisingly, she succeeded quickly. When she went to the Batavian Petroleum Company building, which was then being used as a military headquarters, to retrieve her keys, she bumped into a Japanese soldier who turned out to know her husband from the planter community. He mediated contacts with the Japanese authorities on her behalf, resulting in her moving back into her house a few days later.

It remains difficult to trace exactly what avenues she pursued to convince the Japanese authorities to grant permission. But she succeeded, and the couple's substantial art collection was also allowed to remain intact in the villa. Marie-Thérèse was appointed as a tour guide (*cicerone*) for the collection, which, according to her, now belonged to the Emperor of Japan. Furthermore, the Japanese authorities granted her permission to manage the Pasir Nangka office, located at Raden Saleh 49. She was paid 150 guilders per month for this. Throughout the war, she retained control over the proceeds from Pasir Nangka.

It was not until the spring of 1942 that the paths of Minoru and Marie-Thérèse crossed in Java. During the 1930s, Minoru worked as a journalist, among other things, and had founded an avant-garde photography club in Nagoya. He had made a name for himself as a renowned avant-garde photographer and published theoretical essays on photography. In 1941, he was mobilized into the 16th Army. He came to Java and worked at the army's Propaganda Department (*Sendenbu*).



Regarding how they met—and especially the nature of their relationship—the two gave entirely different accounts. Minoru stated that he met her in April 1942 at a party hosted by Italian opera singer Nunu Sanchioni, and that they began an affair shortly thereafter. According to Marie-Thérèse, Minoru was appointed to assist with the Japanese translation of the catalog for her art collection.

In her Memorandum, she describes him favorably, yet with a certain detachment. She noted that Minoru was *“an understanding person who did not always bark orders”* and was very Western-oriented. Marie-Thérèse asked him for help with increasing frequency, which he consistently provided. In her post-war statements about him, however, she aligned with prevailing stereotypes regarding the perceived hideousness of the Japanese, calling him *“... Sakata, a dirt-poor man of very insignificant origin (...), a very ugly, almost deformed man besides...”*

Both the Dutch and the Japanese eyed the relationship between Marie-Thérèse and Minoru with suspicion. In line with the stereotype that women were uniquely suited for espionage, both sides suspected her. In her Memorandum, Marie-Thérèse noted that when Minoru found an anti-Japanese text in her home, he became furious. He warned her that numerous complaints about her had reached the military police and that he had been protecting her up to that point.

Marie-Thérèse managed to remain in her home until the end of the occupation. Once again, accounts of how this was possible differed. In her post-war statements, she claimed to have been interned in her own house and detailed the torture and atrocities she allegedly endured. The photos from that period in the Sakata archive tell a completely different story. They show her impeccably and even elegantly dressed, smiling as she nestles against Minoru inside her luxurious villa.

By this time, Minoru's superiors had noticed his frequent stays at the grand villa on Raden Salehlaan and ordered him to end his personal visits to Marie-Thérèse. He was on loan to the No. 3 Air Control Group, which frequently took him to Singapore and Malang. Despite this, his visits to Marie-Thérèse continued until March 1944, when Minoru was sent back to Japan. Upon arrival, he was immediately discharged and would never return to Java. Late in 1944, his direct superior, Adachi, received a copy of the Japanese family register documenting the marriage between the two. Adachi chose to ignore it, considering the marriage a terrible disgrace for the Japanese. When interrogated by NEFIS in Glodok prison on June 29, 1946, Adachi spoke quite negatively of Minoru and his stubbornness.



The Sakata archive contains a letter sent by Marie-Thérèse to Minoru in Japan on June 21, 1944, combining business and personal matters. She expressed her longing for him and stated her desire to join him in Japan as soon as possible. Whether her feelings in this letter were genuine, or whether she was primarily using Minoru to gain entry to Japan, can no longer be determined. It is questionable how realistic this plan was, and how she would have adapted or survived had she arrived. For someone who relied so heavily on her network, the prospects in an unfamiliar country seemed extraordinarily unfavorable.

The business details in the letter are far more telling. Marie-Thérèse wrote about purchasing chemicals in Batavia to send to Japan, intended for the production of luminous paint. This detail is particularly interesting when paired with telegrams and letters exchanged between Minoru and several superiors regarding collaboration with Marie-Thérèse. It suggests that certain Japanese military officers leveraged her network and connections, and that at least some military leaders were aware of the export operation.

When the war ended, Marie-Thérèse realized she needed to adjust her course. Naturally, many people possessed information about her conduct during the war. It was now vital to project an image of patriotism. As early as September 1945, she donated 6,000 guilders to the Red Cross, donated canned milk, and made her car available. It was to no avail. In early November 1945, NEFIS launched a comprehensive investigation into her wartime conduct. In December, she was arrested—this time by a representative of the Australian War Crimes Section—and shortly thereafter interned on Onrust Island.

During the NEFIS investigation, written evidence surfaced alongside witness statements. Under her name, four articles had been published in 1943 in the Japanese-language newspaper *Java Shinbun*, framed as her memoirs. The explicit purpose of these memoirs was stated in the paper: to unmask the Jewish conspiracy, expose the atrocities of the Dutch East Indies government, reveal the activities of enemy nationals, and serve as a warning to Japanese who accommodated the enemy. Her marriage to Minoru also emerged during the investigations, though no one at NEFIS had yet seen physical proof of it.

Portions of the *Java Shinbun* articles aligned with descriptions found in Marie-Thérèse's other writings, such as the Memorandum she prepared for her lawsuit against the Property Administration Institute (*Beheersinstituut*) in The Hague. However, the *Java Shinbun* pieces contained exaggerations, such as claiming Brandenburg van Oltse was friends with Hitler, Goebbels, and Mussolini. Marie-Thérèse categorically

denied any involvement with these articles. Yet, the Sakata archive contains a handwritten manuscript of her life story that largely mirrors the *Java Shinbun* text. According to Minoru, he wrote it with Marie-Thérèse's assistance.



After more than a year, in January 1947, Marie-Thérèse was released by order of the public prosecutor following consultations with the prosecutor general. Days later, she was cleared for departure to the Netherlands. She flew on a Skymaster, a luxury travel option unavailable to most. How this was arranged so quickly remains unclear. Not everyone was convinced of her innocence; on the list of cleared individuals, "traitor" was written beside her name. Mr. G.H. Evers of NEFIS noted: *"In my opinion, she is a highly suspicious figure who was certainly capable of collaboration (both horizontal and vertical)."*

During her year of internment, Marie-Thérèse was never formally charged or brought to trial. It seems highly likely that her pre-war colonial ties in high society worked to her advantage even after the war. Furthermore, her gender and advanced age played a role. Women were prosecuted far less frequently than men for misdeeds committed during the Second World War. Additionally, priorities at the time favored hunting down and prosecuting Japanese war criminals. Nevertheless, she appears to have been treated differently than other women suspected of spying for the Japanese or maintaining close ties with the Kempeitai. A NEFIS report from November 4, 1946, explicitly noted: *"... given her social standing and the fact that she holds extensive insider information due to her associations with the Governor-General, Van Karnebeek, and other high-ranking government officials, the investigation must be conducted with extreme caution and subtlety."*

On April 20, 1948, Prosecutor General Mr. H.W. Felderhof of the High Court of the Dutch East Indies wrote to the Prosecutor General at the Special Court in Amsterdam: *"After everything surrounding the Brandenburg van Oltse family before the occupation, criminal prosecution has been waived in this matter for reasons of expediency, taking her age into account as well."* In effect, he was pleading for leniency. He added that, as far as he could tell, no facts had emerged that would justify a trial before a Special Court.

NEFIS clearly had no intention of letting the matter rest. In a "top secret" document addressed to Major Mr. G.P. Kiès (Head of the Security Bureau at the Ministry of Overseas Territories), Mr. G.H. Evers of NEFIS wrote: *"For my part, efforts will be made to obtain further information regarding the subject's conduct during the occupation for potential prosecution and trial."* Action became possible when a copy of the Japanese family register

documenting the marriage was retrieved from the East Indies Property Control Institute. The Dutch Property Administration Institute seized all her assets on the grounds that her marriage to Minoru made her an enemy national. Once again, Marie-Thérèse pushed back. She filed a lawsuit against the institute and, through her lawyer, enlisted Minoru in Japan to have the marriage declared invalid. She ultimately won the case and recovered her properties.



While the story of Marie-Thérèse and Minoru during the Japanese occupation is far from typical of the broader Dutch and Indo-European community, it demonstrates that Japanese-Dutch relations were vastly more nuanced than commonly assumed. Their relationship illustrates the degree to which private, public, economic, and cultural spheres intersected. During and after the war, Marie-Thérèse effectively leveraged her carefully cultivated economic, social, and cultural capital. Her personal history further demonstrates the enduring impact colonial networks could exert on individual lives.

Despite its exceptional nature, this history contributes to a more nuanced understanding of relations between the Dutch and the Japanese at the time. Research into children of Japanese fathers and (mostly) Indo-Dutch mothers had already revealed more contact than was acknowledged after the war. In Marie-Thérèse's case, however, we see that contacts could extend beyond individual or personal connections. Moreover, there remains a shortage of research into women's roles during the occupation that does justice to their agency and acknowledges their potential complicity. Women were capable of fulfilling every conceivable role between victim and perpetrator—sometimes several at once.

The search for Marie-Thérèse's final whereabouts ends in The Hague. In 1970, she de-registered from her residence at Hart Nibbrigkade 44, where she had lived since 1950. She was never registered in Rotselaar, Belgium, which she had listed as her intended destination. Tracing her life story, which began with many uncertainties, ends in much the same way. To this day, the date of her death remains unknown. It stands as a testament to how successfully Marie-Thérèse maintained control over her own life through good times and bad.