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‘A welcoming refuge?’ The experiences of European Jewish refugees in the Dutch East Indies, set against other Asian destinations, 1933–1965

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ABSTRACT

Historians have often studied European Jews in connection with the Second World War. However, their experiences as refugees in Asian colonies are less examined. In this article I examine European Jewish refugees in the Dutch East Indies, with British India, Singapore and Shanghai as counterpoints. The focus is on the way European Jewish refugees were received and how that impacted their identity, as well as the role of international organisations. By using ego documents and articles from local newspapers I assess the meaning of the Dutch East Indies as a place of refuge for European Jewish refugees among other Asian destinations.

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Introduction

The most common research topic in the history of European Jews is their experiences during the Second World War in Europe. What happened in Asian colonies such as the Dutch East Indies and British Singapore, where a considerable number of them sought refuge in that period, and were interned in camps under Japanese occupation, is less extensively explored, especially from a comparative perspective. In the Dutch East Indies (currently Indonesia) for example, the consensus among historians was that European Jews (including refugees) were well-assimilated, passing as Christians or as religiously unobservant. This prevailing historiographic opinion has meant that there are few studies about the European Jewish refugee experience in the Dutch East Indies.¹ This absence is even more remarkable when considering numerous studies on the Sephardi Jews in the Caribbean where a cohesive community had been present for a long time.² Likewise, the reception of European Jewish refugees in British colonial spaces had been mostly absent from the well-known Eurocentric themes of modern Jewish history until recently: anti-semitism, emancipation, secularisation, acculturation and the Holocaust.³ This historiography has just recently started to go beyond the European sphere to study European Jewish refugees in a global perspective and there are a growing number of publications and conferences on this theme.⁴

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This article finds its inspiration in these new avenues of research. Building upon this very recent work, it bridges the East and West during the period from the early 1930s until the late 1960s, while bringing the mostly 'forgotten' South and Southeast Asian colonial destinations for European Jewish refugees to the fore. After the failure of the Evian conference in July 1938, where 32 countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Canada and Australia failed to agree to grant unconditional access to a large number of Jews, European Jewish refugees increasingly tried their luck in overseas territories including areas as far away as Shanghai and the Philippines.⁵ The desperation these people felt is aptly described by Dutch Jewish refugee and later Japanese camp internee Lydia Chagoll. She wrote in her memoirs: 'Refugees were not welcome anywhere. Jewish refugees not allowed anywhere. At most, they obtained a transit visa, for a lot of money and then thanks to the mediation or guarantee of higher authorities.'⁶ Chagoll reached Batavia with her family in November 1941 after a journey of nearly eighteen months. All earlier attempts to obtain residence permits for France, Portugal, Spain, Mozambique and South Africa had failed.⁷

This study primarily examines the reception and position of people like Lydia Chagoll in the Dutch East Indies. They were mostly of Ashkenazi descent and possessed Dutch, German or Austrian nationality. After the Nazis started the Second World War in 1939, a couple of hundred European Jewish refugees arrived in the Dutch East Indies.⁸ Because of the chaotic situation, exact numbers are not available. Even though this is not a large number, their refugee story contains fascinating elements, especially in connection with the existing colonial racial hierarchy. How did European Jews fit in? What were their experiences with Japanese occupation and internment and what were their relations with local Baghdadi Jews? The Baghdadi Jews originated in Iraq and had been in the Dutch East Indies from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.⁹

In order to clearly depict their story, and to assess the uniqueness of the Dutch East Indies as place of refuge for European Jews, I contrast their experiences in four specific points (to be explained below) with what happened to the European Jewish refugees in three other Asian destinations: British India, British Singapore and Shanghai. They were all located in the same South and Southeast Asian region and situated on the flight route many European Jewish refugees took that led them continually further east.

As a research period, I have chosen the years from 1933 until 1965, because from 1933 onwards, when Hitler seized power, the first European Jewish refugees arrived in the Asian colonies, and in 1965 Singapore received its independence.¹⁰ The decolonisation of British India took place in 1947 and the decolonisation of the Dutch East Indies in 1949.¹¹ The international settlement of Shanghai practically ceased to exist when the Japanese occupied the harbour after having attacked Pearl Harbour in December 1941.¹²

From around 1900 onwards, multiple Baghdadi Jewish communities from South and Southeast Asia participated in a trading network complemented by a commercially powerful trading diaspora.¹³ The circle around the famous Sassoon family (covered in the section on India) and its trading house were especially prosperous.¹⁴ How Baghdadi Jews interacted with European Jewish refugees is explicitly part of my approach, since these groups came from quite different backgrounds in terms of class and ethnicity, while sharing the same religion. In the Dutch East Indies, for example, colonial authorities considered the Baghdadis as part of the group of 'Foreign Orientals', not as belonging to the European group.¹⁵

The different categorisation of European and Baghdadi Jews is also related to the tension between the traditional identification of European Jews in European culture as 'other' with extreme consequences in Nazi circles in the 1930s and 1940s, coupled with their own sense of cultural superiority in relation to non-European Jewish populations in colonial societies. This ambiguity around classification meant that European Jewish refugees in the South and South East Asian colonies were not automatically categorised as Europeans despite their own self-identification as such. For example, in the Netherlands in 1796, just after Jews' emancipation, contemporaries still regarded Jews as foreigners.¹⁶ The view at the time was that Jews would have just emerged from so-called 'dark, mysterious and pre-civilised cultures', 'a species of internal Orientals', who would be backward, Eastern and Asiatic.¹⁷

The purpose of this article is to explain the reception and position of European Jewish refugees in the Dutch East Indies and how it contrasted with three other Asian places. A key concept that I will employ is 'identity', in this case, specifically defined as 'social identity'. In general, refugees like the European Jews have to adapt themselves to foreign environments which means redefining their personal and social identities in new cultural contexts.¹⁸ In that process of redefinition, processes of both self-identification and externally ascribed identification play a role.¹⁹ In the latter process, the concept of 'social cognition' is of vital importance. Social cognition determines how people think about others, how these people think those others would think about them and how those 'latter' others would think about the first ones and vice versa.²⁰ Pragmatic goals such as making friends, attaining jobs and acquiring a decent house to live in shape the views or cognitions people have about each other. Applied to the case of European Jewish refugees during the Second World War and its aftermath, social identity meant that in practice they continuously redefined themselves and were defined by others differently, depending on the circumstances and the goals they (and the others) wished to attain. This was not only a matter of individual possibilities or preferences but, ultimately, their decisions also depended on restrictions the countries of destination imposed. European Jewish refugees at the end of the 1930s often became transmigrants because authorities did not allow them to settle permanently (or only a limited number) in the country of their preference, which was often the United States, the United Kingdom or even Mandate Palestine. Shanghai was the only place accepting mass Jewish migration from Europe until August 1939.²¹ As an internationally controlled city, Jews did not require any visa, passport, affidavit or certificate of guarantee for entry to Shanghai between 1937 and 1939.²²

During the same period of the 1930s, Jewish community leaders had taken the first steps in building more international links among Jews. The World Jewish Congress was founded in 1936, because of the growing Nazi antisemitism in Germany at the time.²³ Although most of the conveners also occupied prominent positions in the Zionist movement, the main goal of the WJC was not Zionist; i.e. the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. It rather sought to foster a worldwide Jewish project uniting and representing Jews across nation-state borders in the development of Jewish social and cultural life as a 'diplomatic arm of the Jewish people.'²⁴ Furthermore, the WJC sought to transform global Jewish philanthropy into a more constructive, permanent structure whereas existing Jewish charity organizations had only provided temporary help to co-religionists.²⁵ Therefore, because of the international nature of the European Jewish

refugees issue I also incorporate the impact of the emergent Jewish international movement on the reception and position of the European Jewish refugees, including the Jewish Relief organisations that were active in South and Southeast Asia, but not the rise of the Zionist movement.²⁶

Based on the secondary literature, I have identified four themes for the comparison of the reception and position of European Jewish refugees in the Dutch East Indies and the three other regions. These include: 1) the self-identification as European Jews, partly formed with help of local community and charity organisations, 2) relations with the Baghdadi Jews, 3) the international and transnational connections, exemplified by the foundation of the World Jewish congress and international Jewish Relief organisations, 4) those in power in the places of refuge: European colonisers and later nationalist leaders, who became the newly independent authorities.

In the next three sections I first examine the reception and position of European Jewish refugees in the Dutch East Indies and the other three colonies separately, linking them to the themes mentioned earlier. The sections that deal with the experiences of European Jewish refugees in British India, Singapore and Shanghai are shorter, since they serve as counterpoints to assess the true meaning of the Dutch East Indies as a place of refuge for European Jewish refugees during the period 1933–1965. This analysis is based on both ego documents (memoirs, letters and diaries) of the European Jewish refugees themselves, which are mostly derived from experiences in the Dutch East Indies, and articles from local newspapers. I finish with some comparative remarks and a conclusion.

European Jewish refugees in the Dutch East Indies

In the late colonial period, decades before European Jewish refugees had to flee Nazi persecution, a substantial Jewish community was living in the Dutch East Indies. On the eve of the Second World War, between three and five thousand Jews were living in the Indonesian archipelago. This community consisted of Baghdadi and European Jews including refugees who were largely of Ashkenazi descent.

Traces of Jewish presence in the Indonesian archipelago can be found from before the arrival of European colonisers. These were merchants from Arabian countries who settled on the trading route from India to China.²⁷ The Dutch East India Company (VOC) prohibited Dutch Jews from traveling to its overseas possessions, because it said it could not provide for their religious needs. Some European Jews still managed to enter the Dutch East Indies though, by concealing their true identity. This is a familiar reflex that often emerged in later periods too, as many hid any open signs of their Jewishness and tended to assimilate by marrying Christian women.²⁸ In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jews were allowed to work for the Dutch East Indies government. In the second half of the nineteenth century the Jewish traveller Jacob Saphir (1822–1886) noted that at least 20 European Jewish households were to be found in Batavia, consisting of wealthy merchants, government officials and soldiers of the Royal Dutch colonial army. However, he could not find any trace of Jewish communal life; they even seemed to be ashamed of their Jewish origins, according to Saphir.²⁹ For Jewish men it appeared to be difficult to find a Jewish bride in the Dutch East Indies, so therefore they often turned to Asian or Christian Indo-European women. These relationships did not always take the form of a legal marriage: instead, Jewish men often lived together with their indigenous 'domestic

servants' (also called 'njais' or 'concubines') without marrying, just like European men used to do at the time.³⁰ European men could legally recognise their indigenous children from the implementation of the registry in 1828 onwards. That meant that these children received European status and a Christian upbringing, which makes it even more remarkable that Jewish men, too, recognised their indigenous children, as they had to raise them in a Christian tradition.³¹

From 1854 onwards, three legal policy categories existed in the Dutch East Indies: 'Europeans', 'natives' and 'Foreign Orientals' (*Vreemde Oosterlingen*), such as Arabs and Chinese people.³² European Jews were usually considered part of the European category and Baghdadis as part of the category of Foreign Orientals. However, the latter could also pass as European if they had a white appearance or had followed a good education and acquired a well-paid job. More European Jews arrived in the Dutch East Indies in the period of the 'ethical policy' (*Ethische Politiek*) around 1900, which was the Dutch version of the British civilising mission (exemplified by the 'White Man's Burden') and the French equivalent, *mise en valeur* or *mission civilisatrice*, which were all taking place during roughly the same era of modern imperialism.³³

A few hundred Baghdadi Jews also arrived around 1900. They predominantly lived in the port city of Surabaya and participated in the trade network between India and China. From 1923 onwards, a Baghdadi synagogue was in use in Surabaya. However, because of large differences in background, social position, language and rituals, there were few social interactions between the Ashkenazic European Jews and the Sephardic Baghdadi Jews.³⁴ They formed two isolated, inward-looking groups of which only the latter participated in an international trading network.

Besides that, signs of antisemitism were noticeable in the Dutch East Indies until the late 1930s. For example, the Dutch trading society blocked Jewish membership on its board until 1936.³⁵ Yet, their social identity was quite different from the status they had in the Netherlands. 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 the specific job they were about to perform. Most Jews were living in the large towns on the islands of Java, Sumatra and Sulawesi and enjoyed a high standard of living. However, the presence of Jews did not necessarily mean a recognisable Jewish lifestyle. In Batavia, the colonial authorities never granted European Jews permission to build a synagogue and to appoint a rabbi.³⁶ Even when there was some Jewish community life, its continuity was always uncertain because of transfers, furlough or repatriation, which was common practice for all European colonial civil servants in the Dutch East Indies.³⁷

Jewish international community building gained momentum among European Jews in the Dutch East Indies during the 1920s, when the Dutch East Indies Zionist League, the Palestine Foundation Fund and the Jewish National Fund were founded. Between 1926 and the start of 1942, the monthly *Erets Israel* appeared, which united all these initiatives. This was the official publication of several Jewish organisations: the Palestine Foundation Fund 'Keren Hajesod', the Dutch East Indies Zionist League and the Association of Jewish Interests in the Dutch East Indies. It was distributed for free among 'all Jews of the Indies'.³⁸ All these initiatives gave the theme 'international connections' more weight in how the reception of European Jewish refugees took shape from the 1930s onwards.

As noted in the introduction, after the Second World War started in 1939, a couple of hundred European Jewish refugees arrived in the Dutch East Indies.³⁹ Of all regular newspapers in the Dutch East Indies, only the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* reported about the fate of the European Jewish refugees. Most of the articles that contained some Asian references to the European Jewish refugee crisis dealt with the temporary arrival, on the shores of the Dutch East Indies, of ships that were on their way to Singapore, Australia and China (Shanghai). According to the reports, they only seemed to be stopping at the Dutch East Indies coast to replenish their supplies of fuel.⁴⁰ European Jewish refugees apparently deemed destinations further east safer places and probably easier to get admission to. This is proven by an article in *Erets Israel*, that speaks about a 'refugee ship', 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, as: '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.'⁴¹ This quote does not only indicate the desperation of the refugees, but also the willingness of people in the Dutch East Indies to help, even though permanent settlement in the archipelago was not possible. Lastly, it shows the extensive contacts with other Jewish refugees committees overseas.

The existence of these contacts also became visible when vice-chairman Cohen of the Association of Jewish Interests expressed anxiety about the high number of European Jewish refugees in Shanghai during the general meeting of the association on 16 April 1939: 'People are extremely overloaded there. Thousands of refugees have been housed there in destroyed houses, which were abandoned by the Chinese; the committee can only provide them with food and clothes.'⁴² The vice-chairman also referred to the small numbers of European Jewish refugees who were allowed to settle in the Dutch East Indies and the reproach others held against the Dutch East Indies Jewish committee of reception, that was supposedly doing too little to get permission to settle larger numbers of European Jewish refugees there. He explained that the high rate of unemployment -the economic crisis of the 1930s had obviously also hit the Dutch East Indies- and the false information that was often provided by potential new inhabitants played a decisive role: 'The Committee has certainly given its thoughts on this, but in view of the still considerable unemployment, any attempts to do so must be doomed in advance to futility. The chance of admission practically only exists for workers with special expertise, but it should immediately be added that the special knowledge of such people, if an investigation is made, usually only exists on paper.'⁴³

For those refugees who were allowed to stay in the Dutch East Indies, a 'committee of reception' arranged their first housing with hospitable Dutch families according to Dutch Jewish refugee, author and politician Jacques de Kadt (1897–1988), in his memoirs of 1978. However, the more affluent refugees, to which category De Kadt himself belonged, could choose one of the hotels of Batavia as a first place to stay.⁴⁴ Another type of articles published in the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* dealing with the European Jewish Refugees in Asia was concerned with fundraising for them in the Dutch East Indies, in what was called the *Nederlandsch-Indische Steunactie* ('Netherlands Indies Support Action'). This campaign had already yielded 57,000 guilders by March 1939, and is in line with the generous support for the refugees on the ship heading for Shanghai noted above. In one of the articles, it was specifically mentioned that these

funds could be collected with the 'moral and financial help of non-Jews', displaying the mutual solidarity that existed among different population groups in the midst of rising antisemitism.⁴⁵

On 10 May 1940, the Nazis invaded the Netherlands and administrative officials in the Dutch East Indies immediately received the order to arrest and intern all 'enemy subjects', i.e. all German nationals who were living in the archipelago at that moment. According to Cornelis van Heekeren, who was a colonial civil servant in the Dutch East Indies at the time, German Jewish refugees were also among those so-called 'enemy subjects'. The idea behind this was that it was better to just arrest everyone first. The authorities would later find out who could be released again. Besides that, Dutch colonial officials perceived German Jews as a risk, because it was known from elsewhere that the Nazis sometimes blackmailed such people abroad if they still had relatives living in Germany.⁴⁶ A total of nearly 2,800 'enemy subjects' were interned. They were transported from various detention centres to one large camp, called Lawé Sigala-Gala in North Sumatra.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ In December 1941, the Dutch East Indies government decided to transport the internees to British India because of the imminent landings of the Japanese after the fall of Pearl Harbour.⁴⁹

Shortly after the Japanese occupied the Dutch East Indies, the Japanese interned all Europeans including the majority of the European Jewish refugees, sending men and women to separate camps. German and Austrian Jews were not interned, as they belonged to the Japanese allies in terms of their citizenship.⁵⁰ Before the Japanese occupation colonial authorities had regarded the Baghdadi Jews as belonging to the 'Foreign Orientals', similar to the Arabs and Armenians. By contrast, Jews of Dutch origin were considered fully European. The Japanese initially took over this categorisation, which meant that Baghdadi Jews also remained outside the camps, as the main criterion for Japanese detention was the level of Europeaness. Only an *asal-oesoel*, the proof of an Asian ancestor, could save Indo-Europeans from internment. In 1942, one Indonesian ancestor was sufficient to remain outside of the camps, but by 1943 this policy had changed. All Europeans with more than one white ancestor were interned.⁵¹ As a result, many European Jews concealed their national origins, out of fear of internment. This was not so much about their Jewishness, but about their European status. The Japanese were initially not really anti-Jewish, in fact they perceived them as an 'Asian' people.⁵²

In the latter half of 1943, the Japanese demanded all Jews, regardless of their nationality or origin, to register for internment. This number included Austrian, German, Baghdadi and stateless Jews.⁵³ The sudden internment of all Jews was unprecedented in comparison to any of the Asian areas (including Singapore and Shanghai) the Japanese conquered during the Second World War. It is only comprehensible in the anti-Semitic framework of circulating conspiracy theories, which the Nazis heavily influenced.⁵⁴ A direct cause was the visit of a German delegation under leadership of the German economic adviser of Hitler, Helmut Wohltat, who pointed out to the Japanese the 'danger' of all Jews (including Baghdadis) and the duty as an ally to impose harsher measures on them. However, the Japanese lacked the German 'thoroughness'; many stateless people among the Jews who had gone into hiding remained untouched, as proper control was

lacking.⁵⁵ This shows the importance of the theme of ‘those in power’ -albeit in the form of the Japanese occupiers- as it completely determined the position of European Jewish refugees in this period, either as internees or being hidden outside the camps.⁵⁶

Most of the European Jews who did register ended up in the so-called *jodenhan*, the special Jewish department attached to camp Tanahtinggi near Tangerang on Java. The Baghdadi Jews had their own barracks in this camp, which suggests a separate treatment from the European Jews.⁵⁷ This is proven by the Dutch Jewish refugee J. Glaser who wrote in his memoirs that Baghdadi Jews did not mingle with other Jews and that their women could not even speak English or Dutch.⁵⁸ Lydia Chagoll identified the negative attitude of some camp residents towards the Baghdadis (who she called Iraqis) as being racist: ‘when something had disappeared, if anything happened in the camp, the Iraqis were immediately accused without hesitation. (.) The Iraqis were not Westerners, not Europeans, not whites.’⁵⁹ This observation is consistent with the absence of any meaningful social interaction between Baghdadis and European Jews before the Second World War. Besides, their status confused the Japanese, because the physical appearance of the Baghdadis was so different from the rest of the white, European camp residents. Therefore, after long negotiations and pleas from the Baghdadis, the Japanese even gave permission for a kosher kitchen for the Baghdadi barracks.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the devout Baghdadi Jews tried to celebrate the Jewish holidays as much as possible. They astounded the Japanese guards of another internment camp on Java, Tjimahi, when they announced that they would not eat on Jom Kippur, a holy day of fasting and repentance. The Japanese even rewarded the Baghdadis with fried chicken to break the fasting to show their respect.⁶¹

Betty Roos, who was born to a Dutch-Jewish family on Borneo, the Dutch East Indies, in 1937, described the camp and its residents in her autobiography. Writing from the (highly subjective) perspective of a child, she presents a gloomy 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.’⁶² One of the other European (Dutch) Jewish internees, Elisabeth de Jong-Keesing, who had escaped the Netherlands in March 1939,⁶³ uses more neutral words in her autobiography to describe the Baghdadi Jews’ behaviour in the camps: ‘They were Oriental Jews, who traded on the market in Surabaya, spoke excellent Malay and smuggled through the *kawat* (fence) on a large scale. Every now and then someone was caught doing so. This was followed by punishment, sometimes for the entire camp, sometimes only for “Iraq” and the adjoining hall.’⁶⁴

While the Japanese sometimes treated the Baghdadi Jews differently, adding to the separation between the two Jewish groups, I have not found any traces of a special Japanese treatment, targeted at all Jews. De Jong-Keesing for instance 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* mentioned above) and then to Adek: ‘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 also Jewish women with a non-Jewish husband. Nobody denied it -and nobody knew anything about the extermination camps in Germany.’⁶⁵

Jacques de Kadet added in his memoirs that he couldn’t think of a reason why he should help the Japanese in their endeavour. According to De Kadet, they ‘had received their

wisdom about Jews and Freemasons from the Germans, and they had no idea of either one or the other.' Furthermore he contended that even though the European Jews who did register were placed in a separate part of the camp they did not receive worse treatment than other inmates.⁶⁶ Another Dutch Jewish internee Lydia Chagoll, already referred to in the introduction, presented a positive picture of Jewish relations in the camp in her memoirs, writing that Jews' international connections, which had just started to get more substance some years prior to the war, were revived in camp Adek II. According to her, part of the Jewish diaspora was united there: 'A small Palestine without men. Nine countries were represented: the Netherlands-Belgium-Austria-Germany-France-England-Romania-Iraq-China and of course the Dutch East Indies. (.) Together we shared one continuous cot. Everyone was entitled to fifty cm. It was a small barracks, approximately 9 by 5 meters. The group got along well. I don't remember any quarrels, just little frictions.'⁶⁷

After the Japanese occupation had ended, the decolonisation war started and the majority of European Jewish refugees left Indonesia. Only some Sephardi Jews remained and a number of Dutch Jewish soldiers returned to fight the Indonesian nationalists during the decolonisation war (1945–1949).⁶⁸ In 1947, the association that promoted Jewish interests in the Dutch East Indies became active again and the Zionist league, too, was restarted. In Surabaya, Jewish life was blossoming under the influence of the remaining Baghdadi Jews. As a result of common brutal experiences during Japanese occupation, the earlier social gap between Baghdadis and European Jews, which was still quite wide during the war as proved by the camp experiences described above, was gradually closed. Together they formed a community of a couple of hundred people. Worsening economic circumstances during the Sukarno administration of Indonesia (1945–1965) forced both Baghdadi and European Jews to consider other places of residence. This is an example of change in social identity and position caused by the theme of 'those in power', in this case 'the newly independent rulers'. As a result, around 1960, Baghdadis and European Jews left for the United States, Australia and/or Israel.⁶⁹ Their international connections facilitated the migration. Nowadays a handful of Indonesian Jews remain, but they usually 'pass' as Christians. The most important reason is the presence of the many circulating anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that blame Jews for all the uncertainties that modernization, exemplified by secular liberalism and commercialism, has brought to the Islamic country of Indonesia.⁷⁰

European Jewish refugees in British India

Although some European Jews had already come to Bombay (currently Mumbai) in the late 1920s, it was not until after 1933 that their numbers truly increased it. Until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, about one thousand refugees were admitted and distributed all over India with the assistance of the Jewish Relief Association (JRA). This number was probably higher, since several hundred European Jewish refugees had come to India immediately after Hitler's rise to power in 1933.⁷¹ The JRA was founded in 1934 by eleven European Jews as a 'purely charitable association to assist European Jews who found their way to hospitable India but had no means of livelihood.'⁷² Another European Jewish aid organisation that was helping Jewish refugees with visas and admission to British India was the Council of German Jewry, based in London. The

Council of German Jewry was created in 1936 by senior Anglo-Jewish leaders to help German Jews find refuge in various destinations around the world.⁷³

The majority of the European Jewish refugees landed in Bombay, but only used the city as a place of transit on their way to places further east including Shanghai. Most of the European Jewish refugees who came to India were of German or Austrian nationality and they were generally highly educated, including a large number of businessmen and doctors.⁷⁴ But also other professions from the more creative side were represented in considerable numbers. A prominent example was Willy Haas (1891–1973), who was originally from Prague and spoke German. He was a writer, a critic and the publisher of the most acclaimed and widely read literary journal of the Weimar Republic, *Die Literarische Welt*. When he settled in Bombay, he became a productive literary and film critic, who was employed as a scriptwriter by the Indian Bhavnani Studios for some time.⁷⁵

Once they were allowed to stay in India, European Jewish newcomers were confronted with an enormous contrast. European Jews had just escaped one of the largest instances of anti-Semitic persecution, culminating in genocide, of the modern world, while British India has often been portrayed as one of the most tolerant countries in the world for Jews. However, even there European Jewish refugees had to redefine their social identity in a hierarchical colonial society where colour and caste determined their collective status.⁷⁶ In colonial terms, the boundaries between colonisers' and colonised groups -the infamous colour bar- were more sharply drawn in British India than in the Dutch East Indies.⁷⁷ This meant a rather confusing process of redefinition for European Jews in British India. Alex Aronson (1912–1995), a German Jewish teacher and author who had escaped to British India in 1937 to teach English at Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan, writes about this process in a letter to a friend in 1990: 'I was doubly a stranger, a refugee from Nazi Germany, one who was neither British nor Indian and whom they found difficult to "place". All this does not mean that they were not good to me – they were, indeed, as hospitable as could be, and I left behind many dear friends.'⁷⁸ In this quote, the theme of 'those in power', in the form of the British coloniser, takes up a prominent place. This is also reflected in the fact that Alex Aronson was part of a large group of Germans who the British colonial authorities interned as 'enemy aliens' from the start of the Second World War onwards.

An article from the *Times of India*, published in June 1939, showed that in order to be admitted to India, European Jews had to cross a lot of obstacles, which the British authorities had implemented on purpose: 'Refugees are not allowed to land in India indiscriminately. No foreign Jew is granted a visa, unless he has sufficient means to maintain himself, or has obtained an appointment in India, or is able to find a guarantor offering to maintain him in India for life.'⁷⁹ Another article published in the same newspaper in February 1939 reports on a period of five years during which Jews are required to 'settle on a satisfactory basis', so that they will not become a financial burden on the country.⁸⁰ This is supported by secondary literature that indicates that the Government of India had made arrangements with the India Office to admit Jewish refugees if the Council for German Jewry offered a financial guarantee for five years.⁸¹ If at that point a refugee had not found employment in India yet, he would be sent back to the United Kingdom at the council's expenses.⁸²

Some European Jewish refugees, who stayed in India, considered themselves superior to India's established Baghdadi Jewish communities, others formed friendships with them

or with elite Indians. Baghdadi Jews formed the largest Jewish group before the European Jewish refugees arrived. They moved to Indian shores in considerable numbers from the 1830s onwards, as a result of the persecutions of the governor of Baghdad, Daud Pasha (1817–1831).⁸³ David Sassoon (1792–1864) was one of them, a prominent orthodox Baghdadi Jew born in Baghdad, who founded the successful merchant house Sassoon & Company in Bombay in 1832. His main activities were trading in cotton and silk and monopolising the legal opium trade between British India and China.⁸⁴ It must be stressed that the Baghdadi Jews tended to execute business deals only amongst their own narrow circle of traders, excluding European Jews at least in the period before the rising number of refugees from Europe because of Nazi persecutions. This attitude is in line with the testimonies from the Dutch East Indies internment camps mentioned above that show little social connection between the groups.

In the end, the presence of all those European refugees did not really affect the high social position of the (elite) Baghdadi Jews.⁸⁵ The reactions of the upper-middle-class circles of British India, however, were disproportionately intense in relation to the size of the group of European Jewish refugees. The reactions focus on two major groups among them: businessmen and doctors. The success of the latter group brought jealousy and even instances of antisemitism among some circles.⁸⁶ As early as 1934 it was reported that German Jewish doctors were ‘flooding’ Bombay, and some Indian doctors commented on that development: ‘to the great detriment of that already grossly overcrowded profession’. However, other accounts talked about fewer than ten German Jewish doctors who had established practices in Bombay during this period, and they had proved themselves to be such well-qualified doctors that other Indian doctors felt threatened in their position.⁸⁷ The opposition they met with could more realistically be attributed to concern for their professional livelihood than to any fear of a Jewish threat.⁸⁸

European Jewish refugees in Singapore and Shanghai

Before European Jewish refugees arrived in Singapore and Shanghai from the mid-1930s onwards, Baghdadi Jewish merchants had already reached the British colonial island of Singapore (part of former British Malaya) by the mid-nineteenth century. There, in contrast to British India or the Dutch East Indies, Baghdadi Jews and European Jews (including the refugees) enjoyed full right of residence, civic inclusion and commercial privilege from their moment of arrival, although many still felt socially marginalised by the British.⁸⁹

At the end of the nineteenth century, economic growth generated an influx of poor Baghdadi Jews besides an increase in the number of merchants originating from India. They were small traders, attracted by job opportunities their more affluent community members offered them. In 1878, the Jewish community of Singapore had around 200 members.⁹⁰

Around 1900, European Jews of Ashkenazic descent from all over Europe arrived in Singapore in considerable numbers, pulled by its booming economy. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the total number of Jews had more than doubled, from around 200 in 1878 to 462 people in 1901.⁹¹ This created a more diverse group of Jews, in which some intermarriages initially took place. However, once more European Jews arrived, continually more hostile sentiments occurred between Ashkenazic and Baghdadi Jews, similarly to the situation in the Dutch East Indies and British India. The

fact that Ashkenazic Jews stood closer to the ruling British colonial elite than the Baghdadi Jews, could have partly triggered these adversarial feelings as the Baghdadis must have felt threatened in their position. However, being of European descent, the Ashkenazi Jews, too, remained outsiders to the British authorities, reflecting the sharp colour bar which was also present in British India. This state of affairs is described by a contemporary eye witness: 'There was the ruling class and there were the others. We were the others, quite simple: we were considered as the natives. Even incredibly wealthy Jews who practically owned Singapore at the time never penetrated further than the periphery of British colonial society.'⁹²

When Nazi persecution started in earnest in Germany after the Kristallnacht pogrom of 1938, continually more European Jews from German and Austria were fleeing in the direction of the Far East, many with Shanghai as their final destination. Some of them tried to secure jobs on the way when making a stop-over in Singapore. Others had already secured a guarantee of employment in the colony, which was necessary to be accepted permanently. Resembling the British Indian case, this was to prevent them from becoming a burden on public finances,⁹³ which made the theme of 'those in power' quite decisive in the reception and position of European Jewish refugees in Singapore. A prominent group among the European Jewish refugees who stayed in Singapore were musicians from Vienna and Berlin, including the organist Werner Baer, the saxophonist Walter Würzburger and pianist and accordionist Kurt Blach, who had already arrived in 1935. All these refugee musicians had received engagements from Singapore hotels and clubs. Hence, the arrival procedure went quite smoothly for them, as described by Baer in an undated letter: 'In Singapore, I was taken from the ship by the Jewish committee on account of my quite good English and my references (.) within two hours I had a job at the so-called Musikhochschule there, and life in Singapore could begin!'⁹⁴

However, these musicians were among the few refugees to be so lucky. Many ports which European Jewish refugees passed during their flight to the Far East did not allow them to stay or even to land for a short time. And for some the freedom only lasted a few years. Werner Baer for example was interned in an 'enemy alien camp' in Australia together with his wife and daughter after a stay in Singapore of just under two years.⁹⁵ Two other European Jewish refugees had been on the same boat to Australia that he was on: the photographer Helmut Newton who would later become quite famous, and the sculptor Karl Duldig and his family.⁹⁶

As they had heard the rumours of the welcoming attitude in Shanghai, European Jewish refugees expected a generous reception and an established Jewish community there, which could help them in finding a job.⁹⁷ However, once they had arrived in Shanghai, their hopes of finding a safe haven could soon turn out to be false. This is reported by an article in *The Straits Times* from 1939, which indicates that they could not compete with 'Chinese rickshaw pullers or shoeblacks' in finding employment for which they would be reasonably paid.⁹⁸ Besides, many of them had to rely on the help of another international Jewish relief association: the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, although this is hardly mentioned in their memoirs because of the shame surrounding the need to be dependent on relief.⁹⁹ To make things worse, according to a Dutch East Indies newspaper the authorities in Shanghai suddenly closed the port for European Jewish refugees in August 1939, while many were still on their way.¹⁰⁰ In fact, the authorities had implemented a permit system so either an entry permit or possession

of money was required for entrance into Shanghai.¹⁰¹ Despite the sudden immigration stop, the Shanghai European Jewish refugee community became quite close-knit, due to the existence of a Jewish club, founded by Russian Jews, where members could enjoy a cheap meal and cultural activities such as concerts. Also the long waiting time for resettlement somewhere else helped to create a true, separate Shanghai Jewish diaspora.¹⁰²

When the Japanese occupied Singapore during the Second World War in February 1942, about half of the Jewish population -which had numbered 1500 people before the war- fled to India, where they spent the war years in Bombay and Calcutta.¹⁰³ For instance, Bombay received approximately 250 Singapore Jews during the war.¹⁰⁴ Soon, on the second day of the occupation, the Japanese designated all European civilians 'enemies of Japan' and they were interned in Changi jail. In March 1942, all remaining Jews were ordered to register and wear a white armband with a one-inch red stripe down the middle at all times. On the stripe was written their name, number and the word 'Utai' which means 'Jew' in Japanese.¹⁰⁵ In April 1943, around 100 Jewish men were interned in Changi jail. The rest, estimated at 500 or 600 Jewish men, women and children, kept their freedom. This was quite different from the Dutch East Indies, where the Japanese had already interned all Jews in the latter half of 1943, regardless of their background. No one understood why some Jewish community members were randomly imprisoned while most remained in society. Rumours went around that a German ship had arrived in Singapore and its officers had told the Japanese to 'take measures' and 'to do something' about the Jews.¹⁰⁶ This is probably the same German delegation that had visited the Dutch East Indies. Thus also here, like in the Dutch East Indies, the theme of 'those in power', in the form of the Japanese taking over the pre-war social hierarchy, played a crucial role.

By contrast, in Shanghai internment on such a large scale did not happen. Instead, the Japanese created a ghetto ('designated area') in the area of Hongkou in 1943. Not only was the area too small for the approximately 25,000 Ashkenazi Jews who were living in Shanghai at the time, but many lost their source of income. Furthermore, they required passes to leave the ghetto for work, food shopping, and visiting friends and family.¹⁰⁷ The increased density made the already poor public health situation even worse and starvation numbers were on the rise. Despite the appalling circumstances and the cessation of all cultural activities, the Shanghai Jews maintained their distinctive German Jewish culture, as a small leftover of the 'Little Vienna' they created in Shanghai before the ghettoization. This is exemplified by the memories of Rabbi Theodore and his wife Gertrude: 'We had theatre, we had cultural lectures, we even had coffee houses ... with nothing but water and some coffee.'¹⁰⁸

Many upper- and middle-class Jewish families from Singapore who had fled at the beginning of the war started new lives in Australia, Palestine, the United Kingdom and the United States after the war ended. The remaining families started to rebuild community life in Singapore. Some Baghdadi Jews arrived from Surabaya, Indonesia from the autumn of 1945 onwards because of the violent decolonisation war taking place there at the time.¹⁰⁹ Around the same time, active community members formed the Jewish Welfare Board to help those in need. Besides this, the newly founded State of Israel provided new emigration opportunities. The transition from British colonial rule to independence was not as devastating for the size of the community as in the Dutch East Indies, British India

and Shanghai. In the early 1970s, the Singapore Jewish community still counted 500 people.¹¹⁰

In the long run, Singapore proved to be the most enduring Jewish place of settlement in the South and Southeast Asian region. There, Jews from various backgrounds could maintain their identity and build up their lives after the Second World War and decolonisation. Jews of multiple backgrounds received full Singapore citizenship and are still living there.¹¹¹ Singapore became the hub for South East Asian Jewry where Baghdadi and European Jewish groups harmoniously live together, and they maintain many personal and business links to other Jewish communities overseas, helped by its reputation as stable business location.¹¹² While the theme of 'those in power' made their intermediate position as traders with full Singapore citizenship and all accompanying rights possible, the theme of 'transnational connections' turned out to be most important in the maintenance of Jewish culture and social identity in Singapore.

Comparative and concluding remarks

In the colonial period, the Dutch East Indies, but also the other three colonial areas, British India, Singapore and Shanghai, received a substantial number of European Jewish refugees.

For European Jewish refugees, it was not easy to be admitted to any place of refuge in the 1930s. Colonial authorities (and international officials in Shanghai) imposed severe restrictions on admission, making the theme of 'those in power' most decisive in the explanation of the reception and position of European Jewish refugees in the Dutch East Indies, and in the other three Asian destinations. The restrictions made it quite difficult for these refugees to find a permanent place of refuge. With the foundation of local branches of international Jewish organisations in the 1920s and 1930s, the reception of European Jewish refugees became more organised, even though the strict admission regulations of the authorities were still in place. After these organizations were founded, social and cultural connections with co-religionists overseas were strengthened as were the links with Jewish relief organisations. This made 'international connections' a second theme of vital importance. All the organisational efforts enhanced communal and transnational bonds between local communities of European Jewish refugees and Baghdadi Jews overseas and eventually also with each other. These used to be quite isolated groups, a separation which was still visible in the Japanese incarceration camps but, after the war, their mutual solidarity was on the rise.

In the Dutch East Indies, the main topic of this article, the theme of 'those in power' proved to have continual influence on the position and reception of European Jews, before, during and after the Second World War. In the 1930s, European Jewish refugees were not given a generous welcome as was proven by the modest numbers of European Jewish refugees admitted, if they were even allowed to stay at all. This actually shows continuity with the period before the Second World War, when it was quite difficult to maintain any form of Jewish communal life. There was only one synagogue in Surabaya which was owned by the Baghdadi Jewish community. When the Second World War started in Europe, Dutch colonial authorities interned all Germans as 'enemy aliens', regardless of the length of their stay or their profession in the Dutch East Indies. Later, after the Japanese had conquered the Dutch East Indies,

they determined as rulers the position of the European Jewish refugees by using the level of Europeaness as a criterium for internment. In 1943, all Jews had to be interned, after a German delegation visited the archipelago. The majority of the Jews left after the war, even the Baghdadi Jews from Surabaya, most of whom went to Singapore because of difficult economic circumstances and an increasingly hostile Islamic environment in Indonesia.

Singapore eventually proved to be the safest and most sustainable place of settlement for European Jewish refugees arriving in the 1930s. It surpassed even Shanghai whose welcoming reputation loomed large in the Jewish imagination at the time, but which suddenly closed its doors in 1939. In Singapore, the European Jewish refugees received the most welcoming reception of all four Asian locations. Although the Japanese also conquered Singapore and interned the Jews, just like in the Dutch East Indies, the internment was not as thoroughly executed. After decolonisation, they could easily acquire citizenship which helped in the development of a vital Jewish community which still exists to this day.¹¹³ Furthermore, they could easily participate in the Baghdadi trading network because its centre was in Singapore, which helped them to acquire a better economic position.

The British Indian case can be located somewhere in between these two extremes in terms of their welcoming reception of European Jewish refugees. On the one hand, British India was only a transit place for European Jewish refugees, where most of them stayed only temporarily instead of finding a permanent place of residence. This impermanence was due to the strict British regulations which made obtaining a residence permit dependent on finding employment within a short amount of time. On the other hand, the Baghdadi Jewish community, showed what an important factor the theme 'international connections' was, and they contributed to charities for their less fortunate community members, including European Jewish refugees. Today, a modest number of Jews still live in India although most of them 'pass' as Christians, like the Jews in Indonesia, which also evidences a reversed self-identification in the form of denial.

Although Baghdadi Jews were the forerunners among Jews with regard to transnational connections, they were initially quite inward-looking and traded exclusively with community members overseas. They could usually not get along well with European Jewish newcomers in either Surabaya, Bombay, Calcutta or Singapore before the Second World War, and this remained the case when they were incarcerated in internment camps. After the war had ended, the animosity of Baghdadis towards other Jews faded and they formed more inclusive communities with all remaining Jews both locally and transnationally. So before and during the war, when European Jews decided to flee, the theme of 'those in power', exemplified by the restrictions the colonisers imposed on their admission, was decisive for their reception and position upon arrival in South and Southeast Asia. After the war and decolonisation the factor of 'international connections', that had long played a role in their identity formation, gained in importance when it came to their job chances, their culture and community building.

This research could serve as an inspiration for more in-depth comparative studies on the European Jewish experience in colonial and imperial spaces in general including the frequent intermediate colonial position of Jews. Another direction for further research

might be an in-depth comparative global approach to the reception of European Jewish refugees during the Nazi regime in either Latin America, Africa or Asia.

Notes

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