

PART TWO - THE DIGULISTS DOWN UNDER

While a war waged around and above them, the Digulists travel down to Brisbane by land and sea

A less than auspicious start

Having disembarked in Brisbane, they soon find themselves herded into a field where there are two piles of clothing and shoes, one for the women and children, and one for the men. This is definitely a less than auspicious start.

Shoes and clothes of all different sizes are jumbled together, and it is only by sheer luck that individuals manage to find items that fit them comfortably. The clothes lack any semblance of refinement and are a far cry from the elegant *kebaya*, sarongs, jackets and trousers of their homeland.

For those who have not studied in Europe, the clothing is heavier and warmer than any they have worn before. Brisbane in winter has a cooler climate than the Digul River region, so the heavier weight fabrics are welcome. Sadly for some, (particularly those with chronic respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis), the clothes will not be sufficiently warm to keep out the bitter winter weather they are to experience at their destination.

The most striking attribute of the clothing issued to the men, however, is its deep maroon colour. Ironically, this is the official colour worn by all Queensland's sporting representatives. The Digulists will soon find out they are wearing maroon coloured clothing for a very different reason!

Maroon is the colour of the clothes issued to Australian Prisoners of War (POWs). By that simple means of colour choice, the Dutch have, in the short term at least, changed the whole legal status of the Digulists from that of political exiles to POWs for internment. It is not difficult to imagine the anger the Digulists feel when, at the end of their long and dangerous journey, they realise the significance of this Dutch deception.

Cowra

The Digulists' destination is a camp outside the New South Wales township of Cowra, where the Australian Government is housing all POWs. It is the responsibility of the 22nd Australian Garrison to guard Japanese, Korean, Formosan and Italian POWs held there.

To reach Cowra (situated on the Lachlan River, 310 metres above sea-level and 320 kilometres west of Sydney), the Digulists have to travel by the interstate train from Brisbane to Sydney before changing at the Liverpool Station for the Cowra line.

Upon arrival, approximately five hundred and twenty Indonesian men, women and children are put in D compound, with the Koreans, Formosans and Japanese officers. Their first night there is very bleak, since their luggage has not arrived with

them and they only have the new clothes issued to them in Brisbane. It is freezing and the blankets they have been given do little to keep out the cold.

Noting how malnourished they look, the Australians welcome them with a hearty Aussie meal comprising lashings of potatoes and a generous serve of meat. Unfortunately, they are unaccustomed to such fare and it makes some of them ill. Things improved once they are given rice and other more traditional types of food.

Their Australian guards are very friendly and soon the Indonesians have settled in. More blankets are provided and they are allowed to do their own cooking and laundry. A school is established for the children. Life is definitely more pleasant at Cowra than it had been on the Digul River.

However, it is rather dull. Realising this, the Camp Commandant organises a school excursion for the children. A truck arrives at the camp and firstly drives them around Cowra then out into the surrounding countryside. Cowra is hardly a major metropolis, but to the younger children, some of whom have lived their whole lives on the Digul River, this outing is a wonderful event.

The ghostly white gums bending their branches over the brown waters of the Lachlan are a far cry from the crocodile infested Digul River. They will never forget that Cowra landscape with its gently rolling hills, large paddocks of grazing sheep or cattle and vegetable farms where the Italian prisoners can be seen happily working.

A strategy to leave Cowra - "He who opens a school door, closes a prison." (Victor Hugo)

Meanwhile, the adults have other things on their minds. From the moment they leave the boat at Brisbane, the leaders of the Digulists set about trying to secure their release from exile.

Their strategy is simple. They will use every opportunity that arises to explain that they are not POWs or internees, but rather political prisoners who have been exiled to remote camps in West Papua.

To do this, they need to bypass the Dutch and to communicate directly in English with the Australians. How grateful they now feel for their English lessons at Boven Digul.

They are able to begin the moment the interstate train draws away from Brisbane as they are now guarded by Australian, rather than Dutch, soldiers. The journey, which will take two days and three nights since there are to be three meal stops per day, offers them frequent opportunities to put their linguistic skills to the test.

However, from the start of that journey the Digulists realise that they will also need to communicate with Australian civilians. After all, their Australian guards are soldiers and the Dutch are their military allies. Therefore they use their last precious scraps of paper to write messages to be passed on to railway workers whenever the train stops.

They have no way of knowing, of course, that these railway workers will most likely be illiterate. If the workers' curiosity has been aroused by the receipt of notes from an exotic group of men, women and children being transported from a train to a POW camp in Army trucks, the most likely way they will have found out what the message says, is to take it to officials from their union.

Furthermore, the Digulists have no way of knowing that the unions based around the railway workshops at Eveleigh in the Sydney district of Redfern have played a seminal role in the development of the relationship between unionism and political life in Australia.

For the aristocratic, well-educated Digulists leaders, it seems very strange to learn that JB Chifley (who will become Australian Prime Minister after Curtin in 1945) has been a train driver; and that JJ Cahill (a Minister in the New South Wales State Government in the 1940s and Premier in the 1950s) began his career as a fitter at Eveleigh.

In fact, although some of the Digulists have knowledge of labour movements in Europe, when they arrive in Australia in 1943, they know very little indeed about Australian political life or of the importance of the unions within the Australian Labour Party. Nor did they have an idea of just how egalitarian Australian society is.

Finding someone to speak out for the Digulists - "A voice to undo the folded lie" (WH Auden)

From the moment they set foot in Cowra, the Digulists are on a steep learning curve. M Bondan and the other English speakers give English classes every morning. This is most important, since it enables more of the Digulists to communicate with their Australian guards and with any other Cowra locals with whom they come in contact.

For Bondan, a completely unexpected opportunity to promote the exiles' cause arises. He develops appendicitis and is taken to the Cowra hospital for an operation. During his stay, Bondan has ample time to put the Digulist case, not only to the guards, but to the hospital staff as well.

Shortly after their arrival in Australia, the Digulists select a leader, Ali Siregar, and three deputies, AJ Patti, Yahya Nasution and Abdul Kadir. After learning that the Australian Labour Party (ALP) is in power in Canberra, these four write to the Cowra Branch of the ALP to ask for help. By the end of their first month at Cowra, the Digulists' strategy is beginning to work and civil libertarian groups have taken up their cause as well.

Finally, Dr HV Evatt, the Attorney General and Minister for External Affairs, becomes aware that there are a growing number of ordinary Australians who are concerned about the detention of Indonesian men, women and children at Cowra.

Dr Evatt, an outstanding scholar with university gold medals and a Doctorate in Law, was the youngest person to be appointed a justice of the High Court of Australia. In 1940, he resigned from the High Court to enter Federal Parliament; and when

Labour came to power in 1941, he was Curtin's immediate choice for Attorney General and Minister for External Affairs.

Given his legal training and experience, Dr Evatt realised at once that, since the Digulists have never been tried in an NEI court of law, have never been convicted of, or broken any Australian law, and are not soldiers or citizens of a country with which Australia is at war, their detention at Cowra is illegal.

The Digulists leave Cowra - "Farewell in silence." (Mongkalmata)

By December 1943, all the Digulists have been released. Sadly however, not all the Indonesians are destined to leave Cowra. Thirteen headstones in a beautiful corner of the Cowra cemetery will bear testament to those who have succumbed to a fatal combination of chronic illness and a cold winter.

The Dutch Information Services in Melbourne decide to produce a newspaper for those Indonesians in Australia who cannot speak English or Dutch. It will be produced three times a week and will be called *Penyoeloeh*.

Among those Digulists who go to Melbourne is Winanta. Winanta had been in Tanah Tinggi and had declared himself 're-educated' in order to return to Tanah Merah. This experience has given him some skill in telling the Dutch what they want to hear. Winanta will soon be called upon to use this skill, since he is appointed the editor of *Penyoeloeh*.

In one of its issues he publishes a poem called *Farewell Cowra*, written by Mongkalmata. *Farewell Cowra* tells of the sadness the Digulists felt when they left behind the graves of those who would not move on with them to a new life in Mackay.

As editor of *Penyoeloeh*, Winanta has to be very careful about being overtly political in the articles he publishes, since the Dutch are watching him carefully. However, the wily, 're-educated' Winanta knows that this small moving poem will be far more persuasive than any political dogma can ever be.

The life and times of the Digulists in Melbourne

Winanta is not the only Digulist to go to Melbourne. Sarjono, the former head of the PKI and also an ex-Tanah Tinggi exile, goes there, too. He establishes contact with members of the Australian Communist Party. Having been isolated for so long in the jungle, Sarjono really enjoys this.

After much discussion and thought, he moves his theoretical stance. This means Sarjono can now allow himself to work for the Dutch as part of his "war effort" to defeat the Japanese fascists. He goes to work on the NEI Information Services printing press.

Sarjono's actions are important, since he sets an important example for the other communist Digulists, who are enjoying feeling part of a truly international Marxist

movement again after the isolation they have suffered for so long. He is astute enough to realise that an aggressive anti-war, pro-Japanese, stance will only antagonise his Australian hosts and alienate them from the goodwill that has been achieved.

Like Sarjono, all the Digulists living in Melbourne relish learning first hand what is happening in the world around them, and feeling a part of it. Some of them can speak several languages and therefore will be employed by the Dutch Information Services monitoring radio overseas broadcasts in languages such as Arabic. In this way, they are able to learn something of what is happening back home in Indonesia.

They also receive wages, which enable them to purchase new suits and other such items of European clothing which were scarce, to say the least, in downtown Tanah Merah. At last they have the freedom to meet, to socialise and to feel part of the expatriate Indonesian community. One of places to which they naturally gravitate is the *Rumah Indonesia*.

Rumah Indonesia

Rumah Indonesia is a room at the Hotel Metropole in Melbourne, which the Dutch have arranged to be set aside for Indonesian use. It is an important place for the Indonesians living in Melbourne during the Second World War for two reasons.

Firstly, *Rumah Indonesia* is giving them somewhere to meet with fellow Indonesians, to share stories and experiences and to hear the meagre news from home.

Secondly, it provides a means by which Indonesians can continue to enjoy their own culture and to share it with their newly found Australian friends. Quite a number of Indonesians have Australian girlfriends and wives, and they love to bring them to the *Rumah Indonesia* to dance, not just Indonesian dances, but the jitterbug, (a new American dance craze), as well.

The Digulists who go to Melbourne are soon frequent visitors to *Rumah Indonesia*. Their arrival is greeted with considerable enthusiasm, since the Javanese gamelan that they have carried all the way from Tanah Merah is still perfectly tuned. Dancers, resplendently dressed in traditional costumes, can now perform their exciting Javanese dances to the music of a real gamelan orchestra.

Emily McPherson College

Five young women from Cowra are also sent to Melbourne to train as nurses or domestics. Among these is Siti Chamsinah, who has grown up on the Digul River after her parents and four older siblings have been sent there in the late twenties.

At the Emily McPherson College, now situated in the grounds of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), they join other refugees from Malaysia and Britain who are receiving training to enable them to join the Australian workforce.

After Siti completes nursing training, the Dutch authorities want to send her to join a Dutch hospital in New Guinea. She declines, travelling instead to Queensland to join her family in Mackay.

Life and times of the Digulists in Sydney

Two Digulists called Suparmin and Mohamad Senan, go to Sydney. There, they establish contact with some of the Indonesian Petty Officers and seamen and learn first hand about their successful strike.

They are most impressed with the efficacy of the Australian unions, and decide to establish a union in Australia for the Indonesian seamen. They call it, *Sarpelindo*, from the words *Sarekat Pelayar Indonesia* or the Indonesian Seamen's Union. It is based on the Seamen's Union of Australia.

Headquarters for *Sarpelindo* are found in a rather run down room in Woolloomooloo Sydney, near the wharf, where many of the seamen work for the Dutch and have cheap accommodation.

From Sydney, *Sarpelindo* spreads round Australian ports. Simon Pinontoan, a Manadonese who has worked for a Dutch shipping line in Australia for some years, establishes *Sarpelindo* in Brisbane.

The Indonesia Club in Sydney

Life is not all serious for the Digulists in Sydney because Sydney, too, has its Indonesian "night spot". This is called the Indonesia Club.

Whilst the *Rumah Indonesia* is considered a Dutch initiative, the Indonesia Club in Sydney was, from the beginning, an authentic Australian Indonesian joint venture. It began before the war as an informal gathering of Australians and Indonesian Petty Officers from Dutch cruise liners, at the home of the Hughes Family of Bondi Beach.

Now the War has started, the demand for social activities has increased, since there are now also Indonesian refugees, as well as KLIM soldiers and seamen from the Merchant Navy. The Hughes' residence has become too small so the Club has been established on a more formal footing at premises in George Street in the city.

On Queen Wilhelmina's birthday in August 1943, the members of the Indonesia Club in Sydney decide to acknowledge the occasion by holding a reception, to which they invite the Consul General for the Netherlands in Sydney, Tom Elink Schuurman.

Upon entering the room, the Consul General is somewhat surprised to see that one side of the room is decorated in the red, white and blue (the Dutch tri-colour); while the other side is in red and white (the nationalist colours).

He stands proudly while *Het Wilhelmus*, the Dutch National Anthem, is played. Knowing Queen Wilhelmina is exiled in London, he probably feels somewhat stirred by the second verse, which asks God to give the Dutch strength to release their country from tyranny.

Suddenly, however, the music changes and he hears the words, “Indonesia Raya, merdeka, merdeka; Hiduplah Indonesia Raya” sung with equal depth of feeling. The club leadership wants to show support for the allied cause, but also feels the expression of Indonesian nationalism should not be suppressed.

Being a true diplomat, Tom Elink Schuurman gives a speech in which he talks of the glorious NEI to come after the war, and reminds everyone of Queen Wilhelmina’s 1941 promise of autonomy for the NEI. The President of the Club, Raden Mas Soeprapto, replies by vowing to support the allied cause and by welcoming the Queen’s promise of autonomy.

Consul General Schuurman remains ostensibly unperturbed by the events of the evening. However, when he leaves the Indonesia Club that night, he takes away with him a clear understanding of the nationalist views of the Indonesian Petty Officers who belong to the Indonesia Club in Sydney.

Mackay

When the Dutch evacuate the exiles from Tanah Tinggi, among those to come to Australia on the same ship are the civilian families of the Ambonese and Moluccan guards and police stationed at Boven Digoel and Merauke. They go ashore in June 1943 at the Queensland town of Mackay.

They soon discover that there are already a community of expatriate Indonesians living there. Mackay is the principal port of the Australian sugar industry and among its population are the descendents of Pacific Islanders, Tamils and Javanese who have been bought there as indentured labour to work in the cane fields in the nineteenth century.

The Ambonese and Moluccan families quickly settled into the accommodation the NEI administration has rented for them. They are loyal to the Dutch, and therefore no restrictions are placed upon them during their stay in Mackay. Sixty-six children attend the Mackay Central School and the Indonesians, who are nearly all Christians, soon make friends at the local Apostolic Church.

By March 1944, the NEI administration has decided it is safe for these Indonesian families to return to Merauke. They bid farewell to their new Australian friends and leave on the first day of April. Firm friendships have been made with Australians, who vow to keep in touch.

On the sixth day of April a new group of Indonesians sails into the port of Mackay. These are the family groups from Cowra, whom the NEI administration has been anxious to place in a warmer climate, away from the capital cities.

The Dutch agree to pay their medical expenses, gas, electricity and accommodation (largely that previously occupied by the returning Ambonese civilians). They are also to be given a weekly living allowance.

“And laughter, learnt of friends...” (Rupert Brooke)

Although it is probably the last thing on their mind when they negotiate the arrangements with the Australian Government, the NEI administration could not have chosen a better place to send them than Mackay.

The climate is tropical, but certainly not as harsh as that they have endured on the Digul River. Mackay is, by local standards, a cosmopolitan place, with its own tiny Malay Muslim quarter. They have just enjoyed being host to the Ambonese and Moluccans. Anyway, there is always plenty of that the legendary North Queensland hospitality to go around.

Although the people of Mackay soon notice significant differences between their two groups of Indonesian guests, it never seems to worry them. The locals make no distinction between the civilian and Digulist Indonesians, simply calling them all “evacuees”. Having farewelled one group of Indonesians on a Saturday, they just set about welcoming the next group the following Thursday!

For the Digulist children, this is a unique schooling opportunity, since they are to go to an Australian school, rather than one provided from within their own community. The Mackay North Primary School is chosen and its teachers and pupils set about making thirty-one Indonesian children feel welcome.

Within no time, the teachers are praising their new pupils for being obedient and intelligent. Meanwhile, the Indonesian children have made Australian friends with whom they could play the universal games children play.....and share their laughter.

Kebebasan - Mackay-style

The biggest problem in Mackay is a shortage of manpower. The Digulists are very happy to join the local workforce.

Some men go to work in the cane fields and sugar mills. The local engineering and agricultural machinery firm employs the skilled workers and they are long to be remembered for their discipline, reliability and skill. Women are welcomed onto the staff of the local laundry, which is stretched to capacity by providing a service to the US army.

For the Digulists, it is a good opportunity to supplement their allowance from the Dutch of £1/1/- to each adult and child over nine years and 10/6 for children less than nine. Additional money enables them to purchase new household items and clothing, which their “*naturalisten*” status had for the most part, denied them in Boven Digul.

Firstly, there is, of course, that tiny Malay quarter where Batik is available. Soon bright new sarongs are to be seen hanging on the clotheslines of North Mackay. There are always willing and friendly neighbours who can show the women how to minimise the effects of food rationing by a little bartering in the thriving local ‘black market’.

Bicycles are in huge demand, giving the Digulists freedom to move around the town in a way they could never do in the cramped confines of Tanah Merah. While they are not allowed to leave the Mackay district, they are free to become part of the local Mackay community in a way some of them have not enjoyed for many years. They make the most of it.

The "Red North" - Mackay-style

Nobody has thought to tell the Dutch at the time of the rather tense negotiations on the relocation sites for the Digulists at Cowra, that North Queensland is called the "Red North" of Australia and that Mackay is no exception. The nearby town of Bowen has the distinction of being the first and only place in Australia to have elected a Communist to Parliament.

Frederick Woolnough (Fred) Patterson is a barrister who has embraced Marxism while studying Divinity at Oxford, where he has gone after receiving a Rhodes Scholarship. He is elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland (MLA) in 1944, the very year the Digulists come to Mackay. He will retain his seat until 1950. A man of his stature gives the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) considerable creditability and acceptance both in wartime and the immediate post-war years.

During the war years, Mackay's local CPA leader is Jack Burnett, who operates a bookstore and lending library in Wood Street. There in the evenings, Burnett holds his CPA meetings and the Indonesians are soon invited to come. The North Queensland CPA is most supportive of the Digulist communists, helping them to attend meetings in Brisbane and interstate.

The meetings convened by Jack Burnett are open to everyone of more radical political persuasion. "American leftists from Brooklyn" often come. PKI members of the Mackay Digulist community, as well as representatives of the other Indonesian nationalist movements who are living there, also attend.

With attendees being representative of a variety of political theories, meetings at Burnett's Bookstore are lively, to say the least. There is always agreement, however, on one thing. This is the importance of establishing an independent Indonesia, free from the shackles of Dutch imperialism.

Ironically, although nurtured by the CPA network, when a committee for Indonesian independence is started in Mackay, the three leading members of this, AJ Patti, Yahya Nasution and Kadirun, are members of *Partai Kebangsaan Indonesia* (PARKI, National Party of Indonesia) and not the PKI.

An Australia-Indonesia Association is formed

Meanwhile, back in Sydney in early 1944, a young Australian woman called Molly Warner meets informally with a group of friends. They are all rather radical thinkers and someone suggests it is important that Australia should develop closer links to Asia when the war is over. In particular, they see the importance of Australia acknowledging the Atlantic Charter by supporting the principle of self-determination

for Asian countries that have been under colonial rule.

They decide to hold a luncheon meeting to which representatives of key community organisations will be invited. The function is a great success and many key organisations send representatives. Indonesia, or the Netherlands East Indies, as it is then known, is chosen as the country with which to develop closer links.

Only a few people attending the dinner have any knowledge about the land of many islands to the north west of Australia. The majority, including Molly, have never met an Indonesian and know nothing at all about Indonesia. However, they all believe that Australia should do what it can to uphold the principles of the Atlantic Charter.

Molly decides that the first thing she must do is to meet some Indonesians and she starts by going to the Indonesia Club in George Street. There she meets three different groups of Indonesians, the Petty Officers (who are on the Club Executive), the seamen (with whom in the main she cannot converse) and some men who have been political exiles in a camp on the Digul River.

Through meeting and talking with all these men, particularly the Digulists, she develops an affinity with their cause, which is to see the establishment of an independent democratic state, free of the shackles of colonialism. Molly offers the Indonesians associate membership of the Australia-Indonesia Association (AIA).

Meanwhile, the Australia-Indonesia Association is taking shape. Office bearers have been elected. Professor Elkin (a distinguished anthropologist from the University of Sydney) is the Chairman and Bishop Cranswick (Chairman of the Church of England Board of Missions) is the Vice Chairman. Molly Warner is the Honorary Secretary.

Committee members include members of organisations such as the Housewives Association, the NSW Trades and Labour Council, the Civil Rights Association, trade unions and individual citizens with a personal connection to Indonesia. There is one executive member from the Communist Party of Australia although the Association tries to remain apolitical.

The AIA executive decides the AIA needs a Patron, so Molly is sent to invite the Dutch Consular General in Sydney, Dr Penninck, to accept the position. She soon realises that he fears she is a dangerous subversive and that he believes an Australia-Indonesia Association is not in the Netherlands long-term, post-war colonial interests. Molly's meeting with Dr Penninck is therefore unsuccessful.

However, the AIA has by then been successful in one way. It has introduced Molly Warner to Indonesia and to Indonesians. Molly's family tradition is that of wholeheartedly belonging to a series of causes and organisations. These include the Theosophical Society, Douglas Social Credit, the Liberal Catholic Church, Toc H, the Deaf and Dumb Society and the Little Theatre.

Now Molly Warner is beginning to embrace both a nation and its people. This time it will be different. Her commitment will last for the rest of her life.

Bondan does his bit for the "war effort"

When the Digulists leave Cowra, many of the single men, including Bondan, find work in the Australian Employment Companies. They are an auxiliary to the Australian Armed Forces and are composed of people who want to contribute to the "war effort" but are not Australian citizens.

Bondan is sent to Queensland and works in ammunition factories at Helidon and Toowoomba, areas to the west of Brisbane. Bondan is certainly no firebrand and knows nothing about explosives. Fortunately, the job only involves lifting, stacking, loading and unloading boxes as well as keeping inventories of stock.

He finds the work does not challenge him intellectually in any way. However, it does give Bondan an opportunity of having closer contact with members of the Second AIF. The egalitarian nature of the relationship between the Australian Army Officers and the men under their command makes a deep and lasting impression on Bondan.

Indeed, this is something all his fellow Digulists encounter and discuss with him. They have all been accustomed to the rigid hierarchical system which the Dutch use to structure their colonial society and Bondan and his friends find the Australian way far more appealing. Bondan sees this as a good model for his country to adopt once independence had been achieved.

Once the war in Europe ends and the focus of the war in the Pacific shifts out of Australia, the Australian Employment Company that employs Bondan disbands. He moves to Melbourne and joins the staff of *Penyoeloh*.

Unfortunately, he writes a somewhat passionately nationalistic article, which again draws him to the attention of the Dutch authorities, who have long regarded him with suspicion. Realising he is putting his fellow Digulist, Winanta, in a difficult position, Bondan immediately leaves *Penyoeloh*, and goes to live in an Indonesian hostel.

Digulists working for the Dutch Intelligence Services monitoring overseas radio broadcasts are living in this hostel. Early in the morning of the 18th August 1945, they bring the news to Bondan that they have heard broadcast in Arabic from Bukittinggi Radio in West Sumatra announcing that Sukarno and Hatta have made a Proclamation of Indonesia's Independence the previous day.

Bondan's work in Australia has really just begun...