

Children of WWII: Indo-Europeans born during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies in search for their Japanese fathers

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Public lecture, May 29, 2018

“I don’t know who my parents are. So I don’t know what my identity is.”

“Few of us grew up in a warm nest. To begin with, we didn’t have a father, and we also had practically no mother.”

“People understand that children, teenagers in puberty will look for their unknown father or mother. But not with an adult. And absolutely not if this person has a family and successful career.”

“I want to be at peace with myself. I would like to have a photo [of my father].”

(van der Werff, 1991)

In this talk, I examine the experiences and identities of Indo-European (hereafter Indisch) – Japanese children born of war, who were born to Indo-European mothers and Japanese fathers during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies (1942–1945). To be of mixed-race, and partially Japanese descent is a topic which attracts increasing attention in academic and public debates nowadays, often focusing on experiences of exclusion within contemporary Japanese society (e.g. Murphy–Shigematsu 2008; Iwabuchi 2014). To be of partially Japanese descent, however takes on a very different meaning in the context of war and occupation. For a child of the former ‘enemy’ who grew up within a community which suffered pain and loss during the Japanese occupation, being of Japanese descent is also associated with the atrocities committed by the country of their fathers, and a sense of culpability for the pain and suffering inflicted unto their community and family. As the above quotes show, the circumstances of their conception and lack of knowledge and a relationship with their biological father had a profound impact on the upbringing of Indisch–Japanese children born of war, deeply affecting their sense of self and identity in the long term. Their search for their fathers however appears to not just be a matter of completing their family tree, but also closely tied to very existential questions about their identity. Many have spent years searching for their fathers, and trying to connect with Japan. What exactly is it that they are looking for in searching for their fathers? What would a photograph of their father actually provide them with? And why would you feel that your life is incomplete without looking for a father you never knew, at age 70? And what, if anything, will be achieved if you find your Japanese family?

In this talk, I explore these questions based on archival research as well as oral history interviews in conducted with Indisch–Japanese residing in the Netherlands. Most of my interviewees belong to one of two organizations of Indisch–Japanese, Vereniging JIN, and the Sakura Foundation, who have both been

active in bringing Indisch–Japanese together and supporting their search for their fathers. To protect the privacy of my interviewees, I will use pseudonyms throughout my talk, except where their name of the interviewee and their story has already been openly published.

Who are Indisch-Japanese?

Born between 1943 and 1946, Indisch–Japanese were conceived between Indo–European women and Japanese men, who were members of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies. Most mothers identified as Indo–European; they were born and raised in the Dutch East Indies and had in most cases both Dutch and Indonesian family. There were also a considerable number of children born to Indonesian mothers, but as they were less likely to move to the Netherlands after Indonesian independence, they are not the focus of my research.

The fathers of Indisch–Japanese were men who belonged to the Japanese occupation forces, and often appeared to be men of higher rank. A number of fathers were known to have been members of the Kempeitai, but the majority served in civilian functions, and worked in transport, distribution, and came to encounter local women as part of their daily activities for their work (Torikai 1952). Since the Japanese occupation forces also included Korean recruits, there are also some examples of Korean fathers who were deployed in the Indies.

Very few of these couples were able to remain together after Japan’s capitulation, and in most cases, children stayed with their mothers or their mothers’ families, and resettled to the Netherlands in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Only about 100 couples are known to have repatriated together to Japan in 1946. In most cases, Indisch–Japanese did not know the identity of their fathers when they were young, and only came to discover that their fathers were Japanese as adults, or even when they reached themselves retirement age. There are no hard figures regarding the actual number of Indisch–Japanese children, but it has been estimated to be between a thousand and several thousand, and only about 100 have come forward and joined a community of Indisch–Japanese in the Netherlands (Gieske 2016).

History, memory, and identity

One of the key issues I would like to explore in this talk is how the life stories of Indisch–Japanese are related to the history and memory of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies. While it seems obvious that children born of war feel the impact of the occupation in their lives, one has to remember that they were born between 1943 and 1946, and therefore did not consciously experience the Japanese occupation. Instead, it is their community’s memory of the occupation which has played a central role in the shaping their understanding of the occupation, and their identity as Indisch–Japanese.

As Benedict Anderson (1994), and Ernest Renan (1996 [1882]) before him have argued, history and memory plays a central role in forming national communities. All communities, real or imagined, rely on collective memory not only to narrate their past, but also to define their present: who they are, where they come from, and what makes them a national community. In so doing, nations not only define their history and boundaries, but also provide the context within which the identities of members of the national community form.

A key challenge faced by children born of war is that their existence is at odds with the wartime memory of the community they grew up in; they are, so to say, the enemy against which their own community defines itself. In the case of Indisch–Japanese, their community’s memory of the Japanese occupation

came with a specific image of Japan and the Japanese at war, which also defined the meaning of being of Japanese descent. Having grown up within the Indo–European community, they had to wrestle with the cruel and sadistic image of the Japanese at war, and often found it difficult to imagine themselves outside of this image. As children of a Japanese man, many felt culpable of the war crimes committed by Japanese forces, and unjustified in their existence.

What is at stake for Indisch–Japanese in search for their fathers, therefore, is not just the bare facts of the circumstances of their birth, or the identity of their fathers. Rather, their search to connect with Japan and their Japanese family is part of a process, which seeks to reconcile the wartime history with their existence as Indisch–Japanese. Their ability to come to terms with their existence as children with Japanese roots in the Indo–European community, is not only a personal journey. Rather, it is closely tied to their acceptance as Japanese within their families, and the reconciliation of their families and community with the former occupier.

Indo-Europeans and the Japanese occupation

There are several reasons why the memories of the Japanese occupation remain deeply traumatic for many of those who experienced it. One of the specific aspects of the Japanese occupation was that when Japanese forces occupied the Dutch East Indies in 1942, they did not occupy a sovereign nation, but a Dutch colony. Japanese occupying forces not only occupied the territory of the Dutch East Indies and took over its administration but also ended the Dutch colonial control over the local Indonesian population. As a consequence, Japanese forces not only took members of the Dutch colonial army as prisoners of war, but also subjected the Dutch civilian population, including women and children to internment, where they endured three years of deprivation and loss under harsh living conditions (de Jong 2002). While all occupations leave scars and bitter memories, the trauma's of the Japanese occupation remain very broadly felt within the Indo–European community because the occupation was not only experienced by soldiers at the front, but also left a deep imprint in the lives of the civilian population who faced hunger, illness, and loss during the three years of the occupation.

To make matters even more complex, the Japanese occupation was followed by Indonesia's independence struggle, which ended the Dutch presence in Indonesia, and forced large parts of the Dutch colonial community to leave for the Netherlands. Japan's capitulation, therefore, was not followed by a period of rebuilding, but a violent struggle that led to the end of the Dutch colonization of Indonesia. In addition to the deep traumas suffered by civilians POWs during internment, the end of the Dutch East Indies, and resettlement to the Netherlands, and lack of formal representation at the government level made it all the more difficult for the community to engage in a process of reconciliation with Japan.

Encounters

To make matters even more complicated, the internment policies of the Japanese occupying forces led to contrasting experiences of the occupation within families and the former colonial community. Dutch colonial society consisted not only of native–born Dutch, but also a sizeable community of Indo–Europeans, who were Dutch citizens born and raised in the Indies, and in most cases (but not always), had both Dutch or European, and Indonesian family roots. Japanese occupying forces saw Indo–Europeans with Indonesian roots, and therefore initially as 'Asian' and exempted them from internment. Eventually, however, most Indo–European men were interned along with the white Dutch population, leaving Indo–European

women and children to largely fend for themselves during the three years of occupation (Meijer 2004).

Whereas their fathers, brothers and spouses were subjected to forced labor in Japanese internment camps, therefore, young women lived among Japanese occupying forces, and dependent on a cordial relationship with Japanese forces in order to find employment, and support themselves and their children. While they were not confined to camps, without a breadwinner or other incomes, the women who were exempted from internment also faced considerable difficulties in supporting themselves and their children. It is under these circumstances that most mothers of Indisch–Japanese met their children’s fathers. Many encountered their children’s fathers at their workplace or in everyday life, as they took up employment to support their families.

One important point to note here is that the mothers of Indisch–Japanese were not part of the so-called Comfort Women system (Yoshimi 2000). There is no doubt that the system existed also in the Dutch East Indies, but the relationships I describe here are not part of this system; they were not recruited into ‘comfort’ stations but lived at home with their mothers and had a relationship with a single man, which in some cases lasted for several years and are therefore different in nature.

Together, the Japanese occupation therefore had important gender as well as racial dimensions. While Dutch and Indo–European men experienced the occupation as POWs, and the Dutch–born white population was subject to internment, Indo–European women of mixed heritage were often exempted from internment, and lived and worked among Japanese outside of the camps, leading to contrasting experiences and memories of the Japanese occupation.

Postwar childhoods

But the impact of the occupation was not limited to the personal trauma’s and losses experienced during the war; it also had wide-ranging implications for the family life and upbringing of Indisch–Japanese children. First of all, since their fathers had to quickly repatriate to Japan after the capitulation, most Indisch–Japanese children grew up without their Japanese father. In addition, mothers’ own families had also suffered considerable losses during the war; many had brothers and fathers who had fought against the Japanese advance and had experienced internment. Many of them had been subjected to forced labor at the notorious Thai–Burma railway, or in Japanese shipyards and coalmines. Although many grandmothers were supportive of their daughters, the presence of a Japanese child clearly introduced tensions into their family life.

The majority of mothers quickly married as soon as men returned from the war, in the majority of cases to Indo–European men who had just been released from a Japanese POW camp. While marriage offered some economic security, children’s relationship with their stepfathers was often difficult, because many stepfathers were severely traumatized by their experience of Japanese internment camps. While some stepfathers offered a warm home, in a significant number of cases Japanese children were subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse, which had long-term repercussions for their well-being. Mothers were also often not in the position to protect their children, which meant that children had often fragile relationships with their mothers. A number of mothers also chose to leave their children in orphanages, with foster parents, or their own grandparents, fearful of the repercussions and difficulties they would face as the mother of a Japanese child. Those mothers who did not remarry and kept their children with them, in turn, faced considerable difficulties in making ends meet, as discrimination and rejection in employment and housing as the mother of a Japanese child appeared common at the time.

The circumstances of their birth, and identity of their fathers, therefore, had a significant impact on children's upbringing. While mothers tried to provide them with a father by getting married, children's relationship with their stepfathers, as well as mothers was often severely strained by the tensions surrounding their Japanese origins.

Japanese Roots

Let me now turn to the story of Indisch–Japanese and how they have engaged with the question of their origins and the meaning of their existence in the postwar Netherlands.

Indisch–Japanese first made an appearance in the public when two Indisch–Japanese women, Cherie Landegent and Hideko Ehrentreich Gieske placed an advertisement in two national newspapers in 1984, that they wished to get in touch with others who shared their background. Nestled between an advertisement for how to build your own tile oven and an advertisement for a meditation course, the advertisement read: “We are seeking to contact people who are, like us, of Indisch–Japanese descent,” followed by a Postbox address. While it makes perfect sense to look for people who shared their background and experience, this was also a bold and unusual move. Both Cherie and Hideko were aware of the fact that having a Japanese background remained a taboo, and that anti–Japanese sentiments remained common within the Indo–European community.

Yet, they were both unusual individuals, because they were both raised in full knowledge of their background, and felt confident in talking about their Japanese roots. Cherie had moved to Japan with her family in 1946, and lived in Japan until she was 10, and Hideko's mother had always been open about her background, encouraged her to embrace Japanese culture, dressed her in kimono's at public events as a child, and facilitated a letter exchange with her father, whom she met as an adult. Curious about the experiences of others, they had decided to look for other Indo–Europeans with a Japanese father, in order to 1) break the taboo, and share their experiences, 2) engage in cultural events related to Japan, as well as 3) possibly look for their fathers.

Their call to find others who shared their background, coincided, by pure chance, with the publication of a collection about the camp experiences of women, entitled ‘A Wire of Fear’ (van Reede and Onderdenwijngaard 1984) which also included the story of a Indisch–Japanese man and his mother. The publication, and public discussion that followed, for the first time brought attention to the existence of Indisch–Japanese children but also brought into view the specific discourse, which had made the existence of Indisch–Japanese children a taboo subject.

One of the key issues which were raised in the personal accounts presented in *A Wire of Fear* was the topic of relationships between Dutch women and Japanese men during the occupation. One of the contributors spoke with much anguish about women whom she saw as having ‘volunteered’ to provide sexual services to Japanese officers. Nicknamed as ‘roses’ she were described them, with much apprehension, as women who were opportunists, disloyal to their country, and who traded sexual services for better treatment and food. Where other women suffered under significant lack of food, women who engaged with Japanese officers were thought to have lived in luxury and as benefitting from the suffering of other countrymen and women.

The story of Henk's Schuman's mother (which used a pseudonym to protect the author's identity), which was featured in the same collection, further visualized the human impact of such view of a

mothers' relationship with a Japanese man. Although Henk's mother claimed to have had a consensual relationship with his father, she felt such intense sense of guilt for her actions, and felt so ostracized within her community, that she felt incapable of talking about her encounter with Henk's father until her death. He wrote about his mother: "She was very nervous and anxious. She did not get over it until her death. She couldn't talk to anyone about it. When we tried, she burst out in tears... She must have felt guilt, heavy as lead, until her death" (Schuman in van Reede and Onderdenwijngaard 1984).

Her experience was not unique; also other children acutely felt that their mothers were held in contempt within their families during their childhood. Ellen (pseudonym) for instance, felt that her step-father not only picked on her because she was the child of a Japanese man, but also used the fact that her mother had had a relationship with a Japanese man as a way to humiliate her mother, and accuse her of having prostituted herself. She says:

According to my [step] father, I was fat, stupid, and everything you could add to that, that was wrong... Whenever I had done something wrong, he would say: 'Even if your mother is a whore, even then...'...Why was he saying that? All I want is the truth and to say: 'You had a Japanese father and it was this person'... It would allow me to rehabilitate her...I want to provide the story of what actually happened.

Although she saw her mother as a strong and proud woman, the fact that she had had a relationship with a Japanese man, seemed to have robbed her of any possibility for recourse within her marital relationship. Ellen therefore not only felt targeted as the child of a Japanese man, but also felt that she was a perpetual reminder of her mother's wrong-doing. This meant that she not only felt guilty for the deeds committed by the country of her father, but also considered herself as a burden for her mother. Her desire to find out 'what really' happened, one may argue, is then not only an attempt to straighten out the facts, but rather, to find a way to think and talk about her mother's deeds, as well as her own existence, in a new and more positive way. In light of the contempt with which both mothers and children were viewed, few dared to contact Hideko and Cherie, and it was however not until 1991, that the activities of Japanese roots in form of a newly formed organization called JIN, began to take off.

The year 1991 constitutes an important turning point for Indisch-Japanese in the Netherlands, as it broke with the established discourse on Japan and the war, and set the beginning of the emergence of an active group of Indisch-Japanese who came to actively search for their roots and define their place within the history and memory of the Japanese occupation in new ways.

Three events coincided in this year: the launch of JIN — the acronym for Japanese — Indisch-descendants organization, the visit of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands to Japan, and the highly publicized encounter of Freda Rijnders, a woman of Indisch-Japanese descent, with her Japanese father. Queen Beatrix' visit to Japan was no casual visit. It followed a planned visit in 1987, which was cancelled, due to strong resistance within the Netherlands. When the Japanese Prime Minister Kaifu visited in 1991 and laid a wreath at the Dam, a memorial for the war dead, protesters threw his flower wreath in an adjacent pond in anger, thereby rejecting his attempt to express regret for Japan's wartime actions. Queen Beatrix' visit to Japan was therefore a symbolic step to engage in a dialogue about this period and in her speech to the emperor, she took the necessary time to address the suffering of Dutch nationals due to Japanese internment.

Anticipating publicity regarding the Netherlands in Japan at the occasion of the Queen's visit, members of JIN approached Japanese newspapers to make their existence known. Coinciding with her visit, a lengthy article about Indisch–Japanese was published in *Shukan Asahi*, presenting to the Japanese public the existence of the group, as well as their urge to find their fathers.

In the end, the strategy to seek public attention during the Queen's visit by far exceeded everyone's expectations. The story of Japanese–Indisch children was intently read by a man in Osaka, who was himself in search for his Indisch–Japanese daughter. He reached out to JIN and within weeks, was in touch with his daughter, and, a few weeks later, visited a daughter he had not seen in more than 40 years in the Netherlands.

The event of a long–lost father meeting his daughter for the first time, needless to say, attracted significant media attention in the Netherlands, producing both sensational and heart–warming stories about their encounter. Their first encounter at Schiphol airport was captured by tv crews, followed by interviews for both regional and national newspapers. Over night, Freda, who had been shy and reserved, and had never talked about her identity as the child of a Japanese, had become front page news.

She reflected on her experience as follows: “My father said himself: is that ok [to have this all over the media]? I said, ‘so what’? I felt: I have found him. I am half–Japanese, and the whole world can know it. I was so happy...it was as if doors are opening. I had always locked things away, I wasn't able to be who I am. And now, all of the sudden I could say: Boom! Here I am!...I know the man, I feel more free. I am not ashamed of being Japanese anymore because I know everything now. ...I didn't just do it for myself... I thought I would do it for the other children, because they are in the same shoes as me. I will see *that it becomes possible, finally, to talk about it*, for the outside world, I did it for that.”

Freda's thoughts capture the importance of not only ‘meeting the man, and knowing her father’ but the ability to support an alternative story of the encounters of their parents, as well as the meaning of having a Japanese father. The image of Freda's elderly father, in his baret and gentle smile, not only put a face to the father she never knew, but allowed her to replace the image of the savage and cruel occupier with that of a peaceful elderly man, who cares about his daughter.

Encouraged by her story, many more Indisch–Japanese came forward, joined JIN and began to actively search for their fathers. The activities of the JIN also resulted in collaborations with Japanese war veterans, among them the father of Freda, as well as the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare in the search for fathers. Indisch–Japanese were also given the opportunity by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to visit Japan as part of the Japanese Peace Exchange program which was originally established to offer former Dutch POWs an opportunity to reconcile with Japan. Thanks to these efforts, a considerable number of children of Japanese fathers have been able to find their fathers, while others, even thirty years later, are continuing their search.

Father searches

To explore the meanings and motivations behind father searches more specifically, let me now turn to the story of one man who is still searching for his family, and whose experiences and perspectives, in my view captures a number of the key issues which inform the search for Japanese fathers even 70 years after the end of the Japanese occupation. Ton (pseudonym) is a retired professional, and even at age 73, extremely engaged with the question of his Japanese origins. Ton's mother was of Indo–European background, and encountered his father during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies. They were acquaintances,

not lovers, but one night, his father visited his mother's house, clearly drunk, and raped her. His mother's story was therefore not a love story, even though those existed as well.

Ton's mother saw the encounter as a black page in her life. It was however not just the act of violence committed against her, that seemed to weigh heavily on her mind. What appeared to weigh even more heavily, in her case, is that though she had been taken against her will, her future husband and her community apparently did not believe her story. In other words, she might have felt seen and treated as a woman who had voluntarily engaged in a relationship, and to have prostituted herself during the Japanese occupation.

Ton spent the first few years of his life with his grandparents, as his mother went on to study at university, and it was only when he was an elementary school student, that he came to live with his biological mother and stepfather. His life thus started out without a strong feeling relationship to his care takers. Compared to others, he was however fortunate to have been given the opportunity to obtain a higher education, and went on to pursue a successful career in management.

Like many others, he finally confronted his mother about the identity of his father during a moment of crisis aged 45, shortly after his first marriage had fallen apart. He describes the moment his mother finally told him the story about his conception as follows:

It was an essential moment in my life as a whole. Essential in that I landed in an identity crisis. As if I was hit in the face. My parents, and in particular my mother had lied to me regarding my descent. It's a terrible experience to realize as a child that you can not trust your parents. Second, the fact that she was taken against her will. That tells me that: "Actually, you were an unwanted child." And third, ... you are the child of the enemy.

His statement about the impact of learning that his mother had been raped, and that his father was Japanese, and, that his stepfather was not his biological father offers a nuanced understanding of the complexity of the issues he and many other Indisch-Japanese come to face when they finally learn that their father was Japanese.

Ton had already had a fragile relationship with his mother and stepfather, and had always felt that he was treated differently, and treated as the scapegoat of the family. But the moment he learned that his stepfather was actually not his biological father dealt a further blow to this already fragile relationship. The fact that his own mother had kept this information from him irreparably broke his trust in the family he had grown up in.

That he was born as a result of rape, and beyond that, the child of a Japanese man, moreover, pushed him further to the edge: even though his suspicions that his stepfather was not his biological father were confirmed, it did not offer him an alternative family or identity to hold on to. How could he embrace the fact that he was the result of rape, and thus, essentially unwanted? How could he accept being Japanese in light of the war crimes committed by Japan against his community? He further explains:

At that moment, I didn't know anymore who was I was. My anchor, the foundation of my existence, that you assume to have: 'I belong to this family, I come from this place,' ... you ask yourself: Who am I? I was unwanted, what do I do here? Whom shall I believe?

As a child of a Japanese man, it appears, he could not also be, at the same time, Indo-European, just as the oppressor can not at the same time belong to the victims. Having internalized the anti-Japanese sentiments harbored within his community, there seemed to be no space for an amicable relationship between Japan and the Netherlands as Japan constituted the enemy that his community defined himself against. To be identified as the enemy, and as unwanted, in essence, robbed him of any tangible way to define his existence. His ensuing search for more information about his father, therefore, was not just driven by curiosity about the identity of his father, but rather, an urgent quest to find meaning in his existence and find a place to trust and belong.

In an effort to explore alternative understandings of his own existence, Ton departed on a long process of reading about Japan, exploring competing understandings of the war. After many years, he also finally took the step to meet with other Indisch-Japanese, an encounter which, for the first time, offered him a place where he instantly felt at home – a sense of familiarity and trust he had always missed. One of the key moments which allowed him to gain confidence and finally feel settled with himself, moreover, was during his first trip to Japan, facilitated at the invitation of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The trip involves a tight schedule of visiting wartime memorial sites together with other Indisch-Japanese, a visit to an elementary school, as well as some sightseeing, along with various official receptions. Ton called this visit to Japan “the journey of his life” – an unusual statement for someone who rarely shows his emotions, and always appears both restrained and rational in presenting his views. Ton was not the only one who returned from Japan as a changed man, suddenly confident and assured about himself, after an intensive ten day long trip. What is it that makes these trips so special?

When I asked him to describe what made his trip to Japan have such an impact, he recalled a reception where he had the opportunity to share his personal story with members of the Japanese public. In front of a completely unknown audience, he and his fellow travelers took the opportunity to share their personal story, often telling their story with a level of detail and emotion they had never experienced before. Ton was both shocked as well as moved by the fact that a man in the audience wept in hearing his story. He explains:

I was touched deeply, that someone, from 20.000 km away, in a completely unknown environment, was touched by our story, it moved me deeply, and suddenly I felt a connection...We belonged there, they understood us, they understood our emotions. It gave me the feeling: Yeah, I feel at home here....Recognition, empathy, connection. ...I got the feeling that I belonged, because I was treated...like a Japanese.”

There are several things which are significant about this statement. The mere act of sharing his story, with members of the Japanese public, and feeling listened to, and empathized with allowed him for the first time to connect with his Japanese roots, even though in form of an audience of strangers. Whereas he had felt rejected and ostracized within his family and community in the Netherlands, this event provided him with the opportunity to for the first time speak openly about his Japanese roots in a safe space: after all, and this is of course obvious, he did not have to worry about anti-Japanese sentiments while in Japan, or feel ashamed and fearful for having Japanese roots. Even more significant is the fact that he confidently, and proudly describes himself here, as a ‘Japanese’. In other words, he was, for the first time, able to embrace the idea of being Japanese in a positive sense.

This ability to positively identify with Japan had a tremendous impact on how he viewed himself, but also, how he approached his relationship to his community in the Netherlands. Feeling, for the first time, positive and confident about his Japanese roots, he was finally able to overcome the shame and fear he had for so long associated with being himself. He explains:

I am no longer ashamed....I am no longer afraid to talk about who I am...[it was a fear that] others will react negatively. That they will look negatively at you and say things about you, and toward others. You have to consciously work on your ability to remove yourself from [negative] views and opinions, by engaging with the material.

Final thoughts

The search for fathers and an alternative story of the origins of Indisch–Japanese, however, is not just an individual endeavor. During the 30 years since Indisch–Japanese first made their appearance in public debate, they have not only pursued their personal searches for their fathers in Japan, but also begun to actively engage in a dialogue about their place in the history and memory of the Japanese occupation.

What are Indisch–Japanese children looking for in searching for their fathers – and what can they gain from finding their family in Japan? As I hope has become clear throughout this talk, the urge to find their Japanese fathers and family, appears to reflect both, an eagerness to move beyond wartime images of Japan and Japanese as the defining feature of their identity, as well as a longing for a place, and family to belong to.

Their focus on Japan can of course, be interpreted in terms of the primacy they may ascribe to fathers in defining a child’s identity – but it can also be seen a reflection of their uprootedness and rejection by the families and communities they grew up in. Feeling out of place in the families of their upbringing, they may hope to find their ‘real’ family in searching for their father in Japan. In a situation where information about the circumstances surrounding their birth is highly contested, and at best uncertain, the ability to identify and connect with Japanese family also appears to offer a unique means to ascertain their existence, something to hold on to after their trust in the families of their upbringing had been broken.

For children born across enemy lines, it may not only be the absence of a father, but the lack of a legitimate place within their community and its history which has robbed them of an opportunity to develop a sense of home and belonging. As a consequence, for Indisch–Japanese to ‘come home,’ may not only require the identification of their biological family, but also for their community and family to recognize the legitimacy of their existence, and the deep impact of the contentious history of the Japanese occupation on their lives to date.

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