



Thirteen-year-old Maria (centre) was caught in a court battle between her birth mother Adeline Hertogh (right) and her adoptive mother Aminah Mohamed (left).

One girl, two families: the story of Maria Hertogh

How one of Singapore's worst conflicts started over an innocent girl.

It was December 1950. For three days, rioters attacked vehicles, homes, and businesses of Europeans and Eurasians in Singapore. Eighteen people were killed. More than a hundred were injured. About a thousand were arrested.

To regain control of Singapore's streets, the British colonial government deployed the highly specialised Gurkha unit, set up machine guns to protect people and churches, and even closed the Causeway.

The riots were **triggered** by a quarrel between a Dutch family and a Malay family over a 13-year-old girl, Maria Huberdina

Hertogh. Both families said Maria belonged with them. For seven months, they fought over the girl in a Singapore court. The Dutch family won.

How could a quarrel between two families — one from the Netherlands and one from Malaya — result in one of the bloodiest race **riots** in Singapore's history?

Maria's early years

Maria Hertogh was born on 24 March 1937 near Bandung, Indonesia. She was Adeline Hertogh's third child. Maria's father, Adrianus Hertogh, was a sergeant in the army of the

Netherlands. The Netherlands is the European kingdom where Dutch people come from. At the time, Indonesia was a Netherlands colony called the Dutch East Indies.

When Japanese forces invaded Southeast Asia in 1942, Mr Hertogh was captured by the Japanese. He remained their prisoner until the war ended in 1945.

During the Japanese Occupation, in 1942, Mrs Hertogh gave birth to her sixth child. It was an extremely difficult time for everyone. Mrs Hertogh found it difficult to cope. Her mother convinced her to send the five-year-old Maria to stay with Mrs Hertogh's good friend, Aminah Mohamed, for a little while. Cik Aminah was happy to help. She picked Maria up on 1 January 1943.

From that point onwards, the two families had different versions of what happened.

Helping a friend

When Mrs Hertogh approached her, Cik Aminah believed that Mrs Hertogh was asking her to **adopt** little Maria. In those days, it was common for families to informally adopt children without any paperwork. Cik Aminah took the informal adoption seriously. She loved and cared for Maria as if she were her own child.

Mrs Hertogh, however, said she meant to send Maria to her good friend Cik Aminah's home for only a few days. Five days later, Mrs Hertogh wondered why Cik Aminah had not brought Maria back to her. Mrs Hertogh borrowed a bicycle and rode to Bandung to pick Maria up and bring her home.

On her way to Cik Aminah's home, to Mrs Hertogh's horror, Japanese soldiers stopped her. They arrested her for travelling without a permit. They sent her to an internment camp, a type of prison where the Japanese kept people they did not trust. Mrs Hertogh's mother managed to send five of the Hertogh

children to Mrs Hertogh's internment camp to stay with her.

Mrs Hertogh's mother assured her that Cik Aminah would surely bring Maria to the camp in a few days. But, Cik Aminah did not turn up with Maria. As for Mrs Hertogh and her other children, they had no choice but to remain in the internment camp until the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945.

Maria's new family

Cik Aminah was wealthy and well-educated. The young Maria lived a life of luxury with Cik Aminah's family. She had a room of her own, and the family had servants looking after them. She settled in well, dressing in traditional Malay clothes and speaking only Malay. Maria became a devout Muslim and was renamed Nadra binte Ma'arof.

In 1945, World War II ended. Mr Hertogh was reunited with his wife and children — all except Maria. They could find neither Cik Aminah nor Maria. The Hertogh family had to return to their homeland, the Netherlands. Even then, they did not give up searching for Maria. They asked the Dutch authorities to help them find their daughter.

Meanwhile, with the Japanese defeated, Indonesians led by Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta declared that theirs was now an independent country. They announced this on 17 August 1945, a date that is now celebrated as Indonesia's national day.

However, the Dutch believed they should be back in charge as colonial masters. This resulted in four years of war between Indonesia and the Netherlands. The Dutch refused to recognise Indonesia's independence until 1949. To escape the fighting, Cik Aminah and her family — including Maria — fled from Indonesia to Cik Aminah's hometown in Terengganu, Malaya, in 1947. Malaya, like Singapore, was then a colony of Britain.

The fight for Maria

Maria's birth parents, the Hertoghs, continued desperately to look for Maria. Then, in 1949, the British authorities spotted Maria in Terengganu. They knew their European neighbours, the Dutch, had been looking for her. The British informed the Dutch about their surprising discovery. The closest office of the Netherlands was the Dutch Consulate in Singapore.

Officials at the Dutch Consulate asked Cik Aminah to return Maria to the Hertoghs. They even offered \$500 as compensation for taking care of Maria for seven years. Cik Aminah was offended by the idea that she would give away Maria in return for cash.

Cik Aminah's refusal to give up Maria meant they would have to settle the case in court. In April 1950, Cik Aminah travelled to Singapore to begin her legal battle with the Dutch Consulate.

Cik Aminah told the court that she had permanently adopted Maria. She said that Mrs Hertogh's brother, Soewaldi Hunter, had been a witness to the adoption. According to Mrs Hertogh however, there was never an adoption.

The judge ruled that Maria must be returned to her Dutch birth parents, the Hertoghs. Maria and Cik Aminah were so upset that they clung to each other, refusing to be separated. But, Maria was taken away from Cik Aminah.

Cik Aminah did not give up. She decided to challenge the court's ruling.

The public reacts

At the heart of this tragic tussle was a girl and two families who said they loved her. However, this very private dispute quickly became something much bigger and uglier.

Some people in Singapore felt that the court did not really respect Cik Aminah and Maria's religion and culture. After all, Singapore was then run as a British colony. Some people felt that, like the Netherlands, British colonialists regarded Asians as inferior to Europeans. They felt that this must be why the court sided with the Dutch family. The case became front-page news in Singapore's newspapers.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, some people were still sore about Indonesia declaring independence from Dutch rule. They felt that winning Maria back was a matter of **national pride**. They even set up a Bertha Hertogh Committee to gather funds and organise support for the Hertoghs. (Bertha was another name of Maria's.) Even the Dutch Queen appealed to the British government on the Hertoghs' behalf.



A car set on fire by rioters, who vented their anger at Europeans and Eurasians after the court ruled in favour of the Hertoghs.

On 11 December 1950, after more than seven months of legal proceedings, the judge again ruled that Maria must be returned to her birth parents. Hundreds of people gathered at the Padang outside Singapore's High Court, holding banners that showed their support for Cik Aminah. By noon, there were more than a thousand people. Violence broke out shortly after 1pm when the ruling was announced.

The next day, Maria was whisked off to the Netherlands accompanied by her birth mother, Mrs Hertogh. Looking back, some of her family members commented that these childhood events scarred Maria for life. Sadly, her name would be forever linked to a tragic event, which came to be known as the "Maria Hertogh Riots".

Over 70 years have passed since then. Yet, these and other stories in this series offer lessons that we can still reflect on today.

— By ZACHARY JOHN

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VOCAB BUILDER

triggered (say "tri-ger'd"; verb) = caused.

riots (say "rai-yetz"; noun) = violent disturbance by crowds.

adopt (say "e-dop-t"; verb) = legally become the parent of a child.

national pride (say "na-shen-al pry'd"; noun) = a country's honour or good feeling about itself.

Read the other stories in this series in sequence to learn more about the court case, the riots, Maria's brief stay in a convent, and her life in the Netherlands. To give you a better idea of what the world was like at that time, read about colonialism in this region, and about how children have been hurt by discrimination. For the full series, visit our website, www.more.whatsup.sg.