



Bertha Knelt Before Virgin Mary Statue

Standard Woman Correspondent

BERTHA HERTOIGH knelt before the statue of the Virgin Mary, beside her mother, in the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Thomson Road, yesterday. She did this of her own free will.

Telling me this, Bertha's mother, Mrs. Adelaine Hertogh, said that when Bertha saw other girls wearing white dresses, she asked, "May I wear a white dress?"

She handed her Malay clothes to a Reverend Mother.

After a good breakfast Bertha played in the garden with the other girls and appeared as carefree as the others.

Mrs. Hertogh had specially asked me to come and see her. Early on Sunday morn-

This report in *The Singapore Standard* fanned the growing tensions between some members of the Muslim community and the colonial government.

Maria at the convent

In 1950, thousands of people took to the streets in Singapore to protest the High Court's decision about Maria Hertogh. The protests got worse when Maria had to stay in a convent. Why was there such a violent, angry response?

Adeline and Adrianus Hertogh were overjoyed. They had just won a long and difficult court case. The judge said that they could have their daughter, Maria Hertogh, back.

This case was a very unusual one. On one side was Maria's birth parents, the Hertoghs. On the other side was Aminah Mohamed.

The quarrel between the two families stemmed from what appeared to be a misunderstanding between Mrs Hertogh and Cik Aminah — two very good friends in Indonesia during World War II. The friendship soured because of a series of unfortunate events. The climax had them fighting over Maria in the High Court in Singapore. You can read about these events in the first three stories of this series.

Now, let us take a closer look at one part of the saga: Maria's brief stay at a convent.

The convent stay was made into such a big issue that it is now remembered as one of the triggers of the Maria Hertogh riots.

A safe haven

The Hertoghs won the court case when Justice Brown ruled that Mr and Mrs Hertogh had parental rights over Maria. For the court hearings, Cik Aminah had brought Maria from Terengganu to the High Court in Singapore.

On 2 December 1950, the judge said Mrs Hertogh could take Maria back to the Netherlands with her. Cik Aminah appealed, requesting the judge to reconsider his decision. The court arranged to hear her appeal on 11 December 1950.

Mrs Hertogh and Maria could not leave for the Netherlands until the court proceedings were over. Singapore's Dutch Consul-General

advised Mrs Hertogh to place Maria in a convent while waiting. Mrs Hertogh agreed and sent Maria to the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Singapore.

It is very unlikely that Mrs Hertogh had any idea that some people might get upset with this decision. She was a foreigner in Singapore and here only because the High Court case was held here. She would have been keen to rush Maria back to join their family in their homeland, the Netherlands.

According to reports, the nuns at the convent took good care of Maria. It was a safe and comfortable place for her to stay for a few days.

Unfortunate triggers

Even before Maria was taken to the convent, her court case was big news. The public wanted to know everything about Maria. Journalists zoomed in on the convent stay.

This was not the first time Maria had been

separated from Cik Aminah and placed in an unfamiliar place. Earlier, the Social Welfare services had placed her twice at a children's home, the York Hill Home. That did not create a stir. Why were the media and others so interested in the convent now?

People were following the whole dispute passionately, but not just out of concern for young Maria. The case was a **symbol** for much bigger battles going on at the time. Several groups who were unhappy about Singapore's colonisation saw it as a chance to speak up. There were also those who felt that the courts favoured the Hertoghs' European culture and their Catholic faith rather than Aminah's Malay Muslim background.

Although the Hertoghs were Maria's birth parents, and Maria herself was ethnically European, some anti-colonial activists and media oversimplified what was going on.

They only saw a Malay-Muslim child, Nadra, being forced to leave the family she loved.

These people made a big issue of a Muslim child being placed in a Catholic convent. They got even more upset when a report in *The Singapore Standard* (an English newspaper) claimed Maria had knelt before a statue of the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. They assumed that the colonial government had forced Maria to convert to the Catholic faith, despite her Muslim upbringing.

Maria's feelings

When we look through all the old newspaper images today, we can see that there were photos of Maria at the convent



A group of Muslim demonstrators shouting in front of the Supreme Court on the day of Aminah's appeal.

KENNETH CHIA COLLECTION, COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE

looking happy as well as photos of her looking miserable. We should remember that Maria was human — a teenager who may have felt happy, sad, scared, angry, and whatever else at different times of the day. We can only imagine how Maria might have felt while staying at the convent.

Most accounts tell us that she may have been happy with Cik Aminah's family for the last seven years. When she travelled to Singapore to settle the dispute, she probably had no idea that she would be suddenly separated from Cik Aminah. She was also very sad that she had to be parted from her husband, Mansoor Adabi.

Maria knew the Hertoghs were her birth parents, but she may have felt that she hardly knew them anymore. To suddenly move to the Netherlands — a faraway place she had never been to — and live with a family of strangers might have been scary for Maria. Regardless of where she had stayed for her last few days in Singapore, Maria would have had to deal with all these complex emotions.

However, not everyone was interested in what Maria really felt. Some just wanted to exploit the situation to arouse the public.

Historians say that the press coverage of Maria's stay in the convent was a major factor building up to the riots. Karim Ghani, the leader of the Nadra Action Committee, wanted 1,500 Muslim girls to form a procession from the Sultan Mosque to the convent, and then present Maria with a Muslim prayer mat, a Quran, and two Malay dresses. Clearly, organising such a big show just to pass some items to Maria was meant to grab people's attention.

The plan was scrapped when the police would not allow such a procession. Instead, Mr Karim and other members of his committee reached out to the public through the newspapers that supported their cause. It worked.

Maria moved again

The growing public anger towards Maria's stay in the convent did not go unnoticed. A member of the Criminal Investigation Department, A E G Blades, wrote to the Colonial Secretary, W L Blythe. Mr Blades suggested that Maria be immediately removed from the convent. He pointed out that there were no complaints from the Muslim community when Maria had to stay in York Hill Home for two months. However, Maria was not moved from the convent because it was Mrs Hertogh's right to decide where Maria should stay.

On 11 December 1950, some members of the crowd outside the Supreme Court held banners calling for Maria to be moved from the convent. Then, violence erupted. Some rioters even tried to enter the convent to remove Maria by force. At this point, Mr Blythe had to move Maria from the convent.

He sent Maria to St John's Island with her mother Mrs Hertogh. In those days, St John's Island was well-guarded because it was used as a detention centre. The colonial government announced on the radio that Maria had been removed from the convent, hoping it would help to quell the violence. Maria and Mrs Hertogh stayed on St John's Island for a day before flying to the Netherlands.

In hindsight

Today, if you were to do an internet search on Maria Hertogh, the photos that pop up most often are those of Maria and Cik Aminah clinging to each other because they did not want to be separated, the riots, and Maria at the convent.

The newspaper images and reports of Maria in the convent were, without a doubt, a huge factor in the violence that occurred between 11 and 13 December 1950 in Singapore. Yet, all the convent did was to provide a safe and comfortable place for Maria for a few days.

Afterwards, there was an investigation into the riots. Its report concluded that it had been a mistake to send Maria to a convent. She could have stayed at a non-religious place instead. The colonial authorities had not realised that the convent stay would be so controversial. Perhaps, they were not so tuned in to the sentiments of the local people.

The report on the riots also said reporters and photographers should not have been allowed into the convent, due to the amount of anger caused by the media **hype**. Besides, it is not ethical to turn a child's life into a big story without thinking about the child's welfare.

From incidents such as this, society has learnt that we must do more to keep children safe. Today, the law protects children who are involved in court cases from being identified. Professional news media also have their own ethical guidelines to protect children's privacy.

Maria's Dutch and Malay families loved her. They each wanted only what they believed

would be best for Maria. Nuns at the convent, too, only wanted to help. Despite the good intentions of many people involved in the controversy, the situation was overwhelmed by anger and violence.

Maria's story lives on as a reminder that we should try to understand and respect the different perspectives of our various races and religions. It also tells us that society must work hard to do what is best for every child, despite all that may go wrong along the way.

— By ZACHARY JOHN

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VOCAB BUILDER

soured (say "sow-wer'd"; verb) = became sour or not sweet anymore.

symbol (say "sim-bel"; noun) = something that is seen as standing for something else.

hype (say "hai-p"; noun) = publicity that is out of proportion.

The first four stories in this series tell the story of Maria Hertogh's childhood. To get a fuller picture of what the world was like in those days, 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.