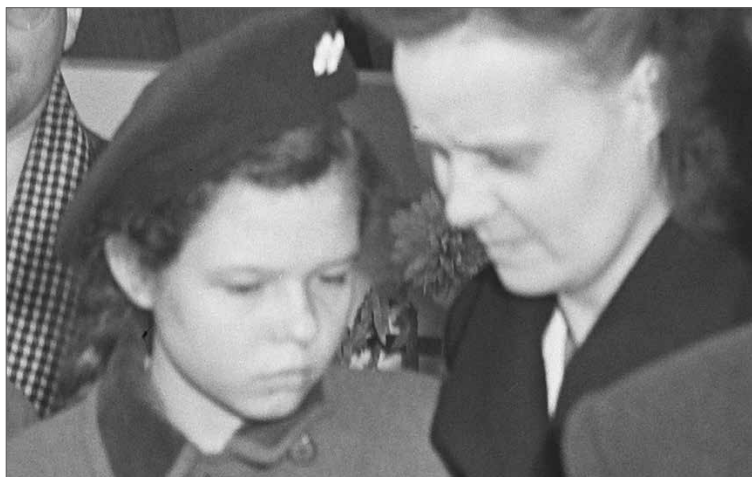


NOSKE, J/D/AN/EF/O



Maria and Mrs Hertogh arrive in Amsterdam to a large crowd of waiting reporters, but Maria was in no mood to talk to them.

Maria in the Netherlands

Maria Hertogh's story is often told only until the point where she is taken from Singapore to the Netherlands to join her birth parents and siblings. However, there was still no happy ending to her story. Her new life in the Netherlands is a stark reminder of how important it is for family and friends to help children when they go through major life changes.

Maria Hertogh's birth parents, Adrianus and Adeline Hertogh, were eager to take their long-lost daughter Maria back to the Netherlands with them. After a long court case, they were given their child back. Mrs Hertogh left with Maria on 12 December 1950 while riots were still rocking parts of Singapore.

The pair received a hero's welcome from members of the Bertha Hertogh Committee. During the court case in Singapore, this group had cheered on the Hertoghs and even sent funds to pay for the lawyers.

Maria, however, was in no mood to celebrate. She had not wanted to leave her adoptive mother, Aminah Mohamed, whom she loved dearly. After being separated from the Hertoghs for seven years, she felt she did not know them. Her experiences during the court case in Singapore had been traumatic. And now, she was in an unfamiliar place surrounded by strangers.

Remembering her arrival at the Netherlands, Maria later said, "I saw many photographers, reporters, and other people at the airport. However, I didn't care about all that at all. I was too **preoccupied** with what I was going through. We were brought to the press conference room. I was too angry and upset. I didn't speak to anybody."

For the first two years, Maria's case continued to attract a lot of media attention. More than 250 newspaper articles were written about her in that period. Some newspapers built the image that Maria was being rescued from the jungles of Malaya. There were reports that referred to Maria as "jungle girl", with some British and American newspapers going as far as to compare her to Tarzan and other comic book jungle-dwellers.

Big adjustments

Maria was brought to the Hertogh family home in Bergen op Zoom, a small town on the

FOOTAGEFARM



Cheering crowds welcomed Maria and Mrs Hertogh when they touched down in Amsterdam.

PHOTOS: BRITISH PATHE



These photos show the moment when Maria first stepped foot on the Netherlands. Many people turned up to welcome her. Maria was in no mood to meet any of them.

Netherlands' western coast. When Maria met her sisters, she hugged them warmly. Because Maria could only speak Malay, she could not communicate with them in Dutch. Only her mother understood her.

Maria's new life was very different from her life in Terengganu. It was difficult for Maria to adjust to the Dutch food and culture. She insisted on having rice with every meal. She continued to practise her Muslim faith, praying five times a day.

The Bertha Hertogh Committee felt they had saved Maria from being trapped in the jungles of Malaya. The irony was that Maria felt trapped in the Netherlands. Due to fears about her safety, she was made to live an extremely limited and sheltered life.

A Catholic nun came to her house daily to teach her Dutch, so she could communicate with her family and attend a convent school. She was not allowed to leave the house without a police escort because her parents feared that she would be kidnapped and

taken back to Malaya. In an interview with Dutch newspaper, *De Telegraaf*, nine years after Maria's return to the Netherlands, she said that she felt like a prisoner in her new life.

Married with kids

When Maria was 18 years old, she announced her engagement to a 21-year-old Dutch man, Johan Gerardus Wolkenfelt. Her parents did not approve of the marriage, as they felt Maria was still too young to get married.

The couple secretly got consent from a magistrate and were married on 20 April 1956. Maria's eldest brother was the only family member who attended her wedding. Maria gave birth to her first son on 15 February 1957. She would go on to have nine more children.

Maria told *De Telegraaf* that, even as an adult, she still longed to return to Malaya. Mr Wolkenfelt started communicating with Mansoor Adabi, the man Maria had been married to as a child in Malaya. Both men hoped to arrange for Maria to visit Aminah

Mohamed. However, Maria was unable to find the money for the trip.

Longing to go back

It is sad that Maria's troubled teenage years led to an even unhappier adult life. While Maria the child was forced to adapt to a new life in the Netherlands, Maria the adult would constantly question what life could have been like if she had stayed on in Malaya. Maria's adulthood was filled with longing for Malaysia. She felt very bitter about her life in the Netherlands.

A Dutch television programme about Maria's life was produced in 1975 and it included an interview with Mr Mansoor. Mr Mansoor appeared to be living the good life. He was happily married and well-off. He did not go into great detail about his painful past with Maria, choosing to focus on the present.

Maria did not share this positive outlook. Maria felt that her life in the Netherlands was miserable compared to the life Mr Mansoor had. Her marriage with Mr Wolkenfelt had taken a turn for the worse, and the couple fought often.

Sad and bitter

A year after the TV show was aired, Maria was arrested for plotting to murder her husband. During her trial, she admitted that the idea arose after watching the TV show about her life. Maria told the court that she felt like a slave in her own home.

"I lived in a prison. I was not allowed to do anything," she said. Maria was **acquitted** after a quick trial because she had not actually tried to murder her husband. She had come up with a plan to do so. Before the plan could be put into action, one of her friends had alerted the police.

Speaking to CNA news channel in 2019, three of Maria's children described their

mother as a sad woman. This inspired her children to find out about their mother's past in an attempt to better understand her.

Maria's son, Frans Wolkenfelt, told CNA that Maria and her mother never got along. Frans said that Maria wondered why the Hertoghs took her away from Cik Aminah, because she did not feel her Dutch parents loved her. Before that, in 2009, Maria herself had said in an interview that her mother had not wanted a daughter. "She never loved me, that's why she gave me away," Maria said.

Wounds not healed

When you put together the different parts of this tragic tale, some pieces do not fit. For example, Maria was convinced that her mother, Mrs Hertogh, did not love her. Maria's claims that her mother gave her away did not match her mother's account of what happened.

If her mother did not love her, why did she try so hard to get Maria back from Cik Aminah? Both her parents spent years looking for her after the war. They even asked the Dutch and British governments for help. Maria's bitterness ran so deep that she was unable to see how much her parents loved her.

To her credit, Maria did attempt to respond lovingly to her sisters when she arrived at their home. Perhaps, she simply became overwhelmed after that because there was too much to adjust to. Many people go through terrible experiences but are able to recover and move on. Maria however, never recovered from the incidents that shocked and hurt her deeply. We can only guess which events affected her the worst.

She was separated from her mother when she was only five years old. After adjusting to Cik Aminah's family and living there for seven happy years, her life turned upside down when her birth parents found her. Then, during the court case in Singapore, she was

separated from Cik Aminah on multiple occasions. While it seemed that she was placed in safe and comfortable places, it must have been frightening for a child to be put with strangers far away from the family she loved in Terengganu, not knowing what was going to happen next.

The media attention both in Singapore and the Netherlands must have made her very uncomfortable as well. Worse still, the frightening riots were named after her, as if she had caused them. And, how humiliating it must have been to be mocked with the nickname “jungle girl” in newspapers.

All these terrible experiences seemed to have taken a lifelong toll on poor Maria. It makes us wonder what might have helped her to turn her life around after the bad experiences. Could

Maria have been helped to somehow build up the resilience to keep going?

Fortunately, Singapore is much better today than it was over 70 years ago at protecting children from harm and helping them have a brighter future. If parents are not able to give their children the help they need, there are professionals — teachers, counsellors, psychologists, and others — who are trained to care for the welfare of children.

— By ZACHARY JOHN

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VOCAB BUILDER

preoccupied (say “pri-**ok**-kiu-paid”; adjective) = deep in thought about something.

acquitted (say “a-**kwit**-ted”; verb) = found not guilty in a court of law.

Read the other stories in this series to learn more about Maria’s childhood. To give you a better idea of what the world was like at that time, you can 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.