



*The Eastern & Oriental Hotel, affectionately called the E&O, in Penang*

## The Sarkies Brothers Hotels

# Watering Holes of the Empire

By Terrence Hong

Long before hotel chains like Holiday Inn or Hyatt were known to the world, the Sarkies brothers enjoyed the honour of owning hotels which were among the most luxurious of the British Empire. The Sarkies' business began humbly with a sea-front hotel in Penang. Within three decades, their hotel realm straddled two colonial empires in Southeast Asia, from British Burma to Surabaya in the Dutch East Indies. Boasting 'modern fittings' like electricity and plumbing, the Sarkies' hotels provided comfort and respite from the heat and humidity for weary business travellers. Not surprisingly, they became the favourite watering holes of socialites, the empire's army officers, celebrities, aristocrats and royalty.

The first Sarkies' hotel was established in 1884 in Penang, an island at the northern entrance of the Straits of Malacca. Within a year, the Eastern Hotel, owing to its sea-front address, became so popular that the Sarkies built another hotel called the Oriental. In 1885, the Eastern and Oriental hotels merged to form the Eastern and Oriental Hotel (affectionately known as the E&O). The E&O's famous great domed dance hall could produce echoes, which amused patrons. Even the smallest whisper was amplified and could be heard at the other end of the hall, undoubtedly a great novelty in the 19th century!

Following the resounding success of the E&O, the Sarkies established the Raffles Hotel in Singapore in 1887. The Raffles began as a cluster of sea-facing bungalows on Beach Road, leased from Arab businessman Syed Mohammad Alsagoff. Critics claimed the hotel would not survive as it was in the wrong part of town. Proving the critics wrong, the Raffles turned a good profit, so the Sarkies commissioned renowned architect R A J Bidwell of Swan and Maclaren to design the hotel's main building. The new Raffles Hotel was opened in 1899 and, thanks to a series of extensions, boasted the largest ballroom east of the Suez before WWII.

Owing to a shortage of rooms, the Raffles leased the top two floors of the Oranje Hotel for long-term residents. Now known as Stamford House, the Oranje Hotel was also designed by Bidwell. Opened in 1904, it shares design features with the Raffles Hotel, especially its Palladian windows. These windows caught the interest of shophouse developers; shophouses along Seah and Purvis Streets still have such windows. With the growing success of the Raffles, in the early 1920s the Sarkies decided to lease the Seaview Hotel in Katong from Jewish businessman Manasseh Meyer. The Seaview catered to wealthy guests who wished to stay outside the city. Like Penang's E&O, it had a domed dance hall.



Photo by Terrence Hong

The Raffles Hotel, Seah Street entrance, was inspired by the façade of a house designed by R A J Bidwell at 23 Amber Road (see inset)

Photo by Susan Hunter



Stamford House, in Singapore, formerly Oranje Hotel



Strand Hotel in Rangoon

Photo by Terrence Hong

In the early 1990s, the Raffles was conserved as a national monument and enlarged. In designing the Seah Street entrance, architects took inspiration from a house designed by Bidwell at 23 Amber Road. When comparing the façades of both buildings, the resemblance is uncanny.

The Strand in Rangoon was established in 1896. Named after the street in which it is located, the hotel welcomed its first guests in 1901. It was sold in 1925 and during WWII was requisitioned by the Japanese Imperial Army for use as officers' barracks. It was then that this hotel first admitted Asians into its hallowed halls.

Not content to make their mark only in the British Empire, the Sarkies established two hotels in the Dutch East Indies. In 1891, they built a resort in the popular holiday area known to the Dutch colonialists as 'Little Switzerland'. Today, the hotel has been renamed the Kartika Wijaya Heritage Hotel and is famous for having llamas in its grounds. The Oranje Hotel was erected in the port city of Surabaya in 1910. Enlarged in 1925, the Oranje is the only Sarkies' hotel to use the modernist architectural style popular in Europe at that time. This hotel is famous as the site of the 'Oranje Hotel Incident'. At the end of WWII, Indonesian nationalists removed the Dutch flag from the hotel's flagpole and replaced it with their flag, as a sign of

rebellion. Today, this top-class hotel in Surabaya has been renamed the Majapahit Hotel.

Little is known about the Sarkies family except that they were Armenian refugees from Turkey. However, long after Martin Sarkies (1852-1912), Tigran Sarkies (1861-1912), Aviet Sarkies (1862-1923) and Arshak Sarkies (1868-1931) became chapters in history books, the hotels they established have become veritable monuments to their astute business acumen. While the proverbial sun has indeed set on the British Empire, trappings of its legendary splendour and opulence continue to be found in Sarkies' hotels (albeit with new proprietors). So the next time you visit a colonial port city in the region, why not check into a former Sarkies' hotel? Who knows, you might get to rub shoulders with the ghosts of such luminaries as Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward or Lord Mountbatten, all loyal patrons who sang the praises of the Sarkies' hotels wherever they went.

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*Terrence Hong has been a volunteer at the Asian Civilisations Museum since it opened its doors in 2003. He has conducted walking tours on colonial architecture in the vicinity of Empress Place and Chinatown and even as far afield as Sembawang. In his free time, he enjoys photography and has built up extensive photo records of Singapore's colonial houses. He wrote 'Trinity of Chinese Hotels' in the December-January issue of PASSAGE.*

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