

My Singapore Roots

By Ingeborg Hartgerink-Grandia

Long before I lived here, I had heard a lot about Singapore – the exotic place where my father was born. My Dutch paternal grandparents' story is one of Singapore society in the 1930s.

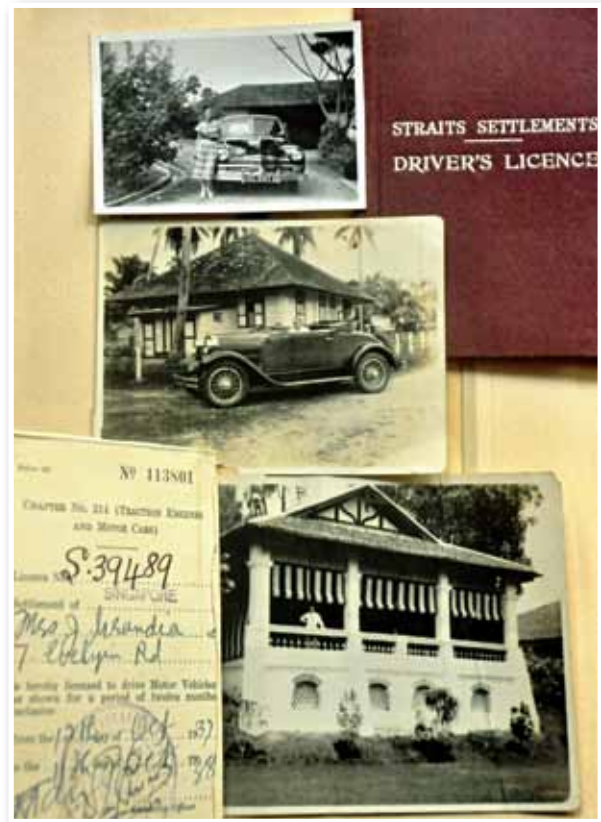
In 1927 my grandfather Jacob, a bachelor, was sent to Singapore to work for a Dutch trading company. His employers must have valued his trading skills because when they noticed that he was spending some of his free time in a Eurasian girl's company, they became alarmed. Mixed marriages were not accepted in Singapore society then; it would have been impossible for them to be received on social occasions and of course also bad for business. Thus my grandfather was sent home, long before his actual home leave (permitted only once every five years) was due. He was ordered to find a suitable Dutch bride and return when he had found one.

My grandmother Paula's father was a decorative painter who specialised in making huge murals, primarily for the big ocean-liners of the Holland-America line. The family enjoyed holidays abroad and had a second home in Rockanje, a fashionable seaside resort for people from Rotterdam. On a weekend at the beach my grandfather visited friends who happened to be my great grandparents' neighbours. Jacob and Paula were introduced and rapidly fell in love; he proposed and of course asked her parents' permission.



Ingeborg's grandparents' Singapore studio wedding photo

My great-grandfather, while being cosmopolitan enough to have arranged for his daughter to go to Paris as an *au-pair* to learn French, was not going to permit her to marry this young man and leave for Singapore immediately. He thought Singapore an unhealthy place, lacking even a proper sewerage system (waste was still collected by the night-soil men!). He allowed them to become engaged on condition that they correspond for a year, before he would approve their marriage.



Memorabilia from the Grandias' life in Singapore

Grandfather sailed back to Singapore engaged. The families then had to sort out how to get the pair married since my grandfather would not be given extra leave for this event. The journey by boat to Singapore would take more than a month and it was not proper for an unmarried girl to travel unchaperoned. The only solution for the couple was to marry by proxy. In Dutch this is called *trouwen met de handschoen* (marry with the glove), which happened quite often in colonial times.

So my grandmother had a registry office wedding in the Netherlands, with her future brother-in-law standing in for the groom. Naturally this was nothing like the big day young girls imagine their wedding will be. She then sailed to Singapore as a married woman and once there, all she and her new husband could do to approximate a proper wedding was to have the official wedding photos taken. One can only imagine the awkwardness they must have felt; they had last seen each other more than a year earlier and now they met again as a married couple.

They seem to have done well, however. My father was born here in 1933 when they lived in a house in Barker Road. When my husband was sent out to Singapore for the first time in 1990, my grandmother was still alive and thrilled to hear I was going to the same place she had gone to as a young bride so many years before.

Ingeborg Hartgerink-Grandia is the third generation in her Dutch family to live in Singapore and is on her second stay here. Formerly the TPM Museum Coordinator and the Council Representative for Museums she is now FOM's Vice-President.

Photos courtesy of the author