

11. AN ASSIGNMENT IN INDONESIA, JAKARTA, 1952-53, 64, 79, 85-89

In 1952 it was decided by the United Nations that Indonesia needed a panel of knowledgeable foreigners to decide what aid it ought to have. Three years earlier, the Round Table Agreement of 1949, negotiated under the United Nations, was signed by the Netherlands creating a new country in the South Sea Islands.

The founding President was Sukarno and the Vice-President Hatta. I never got to know Sukarno, but Hatta I visited many times, and admired his judgment and soft-spoken gentleness. It was too bad for Indonesia that he never had the real power.

Benjamin Higgins, a Canadian economics professor was named to the United Nations panel and asked to name the eight other members. Each was to stay in Indonesia for a year. One was to advise on agriculture, one on industry, one on the national income accounts, and myself on population.

And one was to advise on inter-island migration. Most of the 3,000 or so islands of the archipelago were sparsely settled but Java was one of the most densely settled rural areas of the world, and this mal-distribution was seen by the Dutch, the United Nations and ourselves as the major population problem of Indonesia. The Dutch had tried moving people to the Outer Islands, in a program called transmigration, but never succeeded in significantly reducing the difference in density. One of the experts was to advise on transmigration, and he was constantly frustrated by the fact that Java, especially Jakarta, was the place in the new republic, where things were going on, where the action was. And people feared that if they were far from Java they would be forgotten. It is the same dynamic that populates the capital cities of less developed countries far beyond the useful employment they offer.

When the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, in which I was then working, informed me that it could not turn down a UN request, I was delighted. There would be new work in a new environment, and above all two new languages to be learned and used in a living context. Beatrice and I did not wait to get to the site; we started language study right there in Ottawa. It happened that the Bureau had a Javanese intern; Wija Wawaruntu, and we invited him to live with us on Hillcrest Avenue. And through a friend of a friend we found a newly married war bride, whom we paid to give us lessons in Dutch.

Ottawa and Jakarta were almost exactly opposite one another on the globe. We decided to travel eastward, i.e. going over the Atlantic and at the end of the year returning over the Pacific. I went by plane, Beatrice and the children followed on the Queen Elizabeth to England; then took the Willem Ruys to Indonesia. On the boat Beatrice met Margaret English, whose marriage had broken up, and they became good friends. Her husband had left her, heart-broken and penniless,

but her story ended well--in Indonesia she met a man somewhat older than herself, well-off, and they were married and lived happily together. A very fine person, I thought; Beatrice and I met her several times while in Jakarta, but then lost touch.

We were met at the Jakarta airport, given the car and driver that were to be our means of transport for the year, and taken to the Hotel des Indes that quite possibly was a luxurious resting place for officials during Dutch rule, but was now a tired relic. We soon left its cockroach-ridden quarters and miserable imitation of Dutch cooking to take up a small house that we were given temporarily. After a month or so we moved to a large and very comfortable house in a development built for the United Nations team, and there we had our own cook and ate well.

It has to be said that our children, Barbara then about age 7 and Robert about 4 did not share our enthusiasm for this year abroad. To them it was nothing more than separation from their school and their friends, from the neighborhood in which they were growing up. I have to confess that we parents made a mistake. We did not sufficiently consult with the children before leaving home. I now believe that if we had told them what was ahead--new friends, new school, new languages, all-in-all travel to an exotic part of the world that their friends would be excited to hear about on their return; admittedly also some disadvantages but these more than offset, they would have been happier about the whole project.

However while in Indonesia both children made the most of their stay, Robert, aged 5, to whom languages come easily, would go up and down the row of houses and act as interpreter between the experts' wives and their servants. Beatrice and I well remember the arrangement of the houses--ours, then the Usshers' and then the Decks', both Americans helping to train airplane pilots, then the Lacroix who were French, whose work I do not recall. These were in a row; behind them were another four houses. On one occasion Robert was sent for urgently to a house on the back row, out of his usual path, where he found the mistress, mother of a baby a few months old, distressed because her nursemaid never washed her hands. She must at least wash them before giving the baby its bottle. He said something like "Tjuji tangan sebulumnya bottel" and the problem was solved.

One of the first social events to which we were invited was at the house of the senior Wawaruntu and his charmingly plump Dutch wife. Wawaruntu was a medical doctor with a fairly wide knowledge of the related biological sciences. But what especially interested Beatrice and myself was his skill in water-divining. In a party at his house he carried a stick he had cut horizontally, and the stick seemed to be pulled irresistibly downward whenever there was water below. He then handed the stick to Beatrice, and asked her whether she did not feel it turning down--and so strongly that she would not be able to hold it horizontal. It did turn down, for Beatrice but whether from an external force or her own volition she never said. We had no way of verifying that there was or was not water under the house where we were being entertained. .

We typically had a housekeeper and a cook. At the start a cook named Koki, who was so incompetent and so unsanitary that we let her go. She was succeeded by Inam, housekeeper, and Ibu, as we called her--I have forgotten her name--who was the cook.

Relations between the foreign experts and their servants varied. One of our neighbors noticed a moving object on his dinner plate that on closer examination proved to be a beetle. He called in his cook and complained, when it became clear that she could not see. He, generous American, got her a pair of glasses, of which she was very proud. In fact so proud that she didn't want to wear them cooking, but saved them for more refined purposes.

Since our return neither of our children ever recalled our stay in Indonesia. It was otherwise with the family of Professor William Sewell of the University of Wisconsin. On a mission similar to ours, he took his two daughters to India, and that marked the rest of their lives. One of the daughters became an expert on Indian music, and herself played several Indian musical instruments.

I can be brief on our work in Jakarta on the assignment I was given. There was none. Without someone to tell them what needed doing for the Planning Bureau to be useful, the members of our team idled away the time, always having the satisfaction of spending their generous per diem and knowing that their salaries were being banked back home. (Paid twice in fact--the first payment mysteriously went astray. There was no enquiry about who had taken it--the Indonesian Treasury just sent a second payment wired directly to our bank.) Ben Higgins and Doug Deane, neither having a wife present, would go out at night seeking Dutch-Indonesian girls; about what the others did I recall nothing, but imagine that they killed time waiting for their year to be over.

Beatrice has a gall-bladder operation

Within a month or two of our arrival Beatrice was seized with intense pain somewhere around her lower abdomen. We found a doctor (our local Italian Doctor) who diagnosed the pain as due to stones in the gall bladder that tried vainly to force their way out. An operation would be necessary, something beyond his competence. He referred us to Dr. Sukario, a well-recognized surgeon of long experience and now approaching retirement.

Beatrice and I followed up his recommendation, not without some trepidation on having surgery so far away from home, and by an Indonesian however experienced. The hospital was scattered over a considerable grassy area, a collection of small bungalows under thatched roofs, with unscreened windows open to the elements. The whole scene worried Barbara and Robert terribly, and I had to console them with assurances that I did not wholly feel.

The operation took longer than it normal for the weight of the stones was such that they stretched the bladder, and it was some 9 inches below the normal position and out of the range of the X-ray. But Dr. Sukario found it and removed the bladder along with the stones it contained, Beatrice still has to be careful about eating butter and other fats, but otherwise there have been no ill effects. Except a conspicuous scar that disqualifies her for work as a chorus girl. And a great loss of weight, that was made up during a lengthy convalescence, first in the hospital and then at home. At last her recovery was complete, and I could go on with my work without further worrying.

Being left on my own in the offices of the Biro Perantjang Negara I could satisfy my penchant for research. I explained to the Indonesians in charge of us that my work on their population problem would benefit from on-the-ground study of how the especially dense population of East Java were living. For that I needed some help. For one thing many of the peasants did not speak Indonesian, essentially Malay, the lingua franca of the islands whose usefulness is reported by Magellan in his voyage around the world, and which Beatrice and I found it thrilling to learn and speak. They spoke Javanese, which I never learned. Clifford Geertz, since become one of America's most distinguished anthropologists, and a great social scientist, happened to be present in Indonesia also gathering material for his Harvard dissertation and he had learned to speak Javanese fluently. Like myself he was a member of a group, his studying East Javanese village life--I believe in a project sponsored by MIT. We saw him several times, and also encountered several members of the MIT team, I always trying to pick up some crumbs of the methods they used. My ignorance of proper research methods was a constant embarrassment as I worked with the peasants of Balarjo.

Having, as I say, no clear-cut assignment in Jakarta I gathered a number of students who would work together documenting an East Javanese village. The one who even as a student among other students showed exceptional qualities of leadership was Widjojo Nitisastro, a brilliant young man with an extraordinary career ahead of him, and with whom I have been in touch ever since. (To whom in fact I intend to e-mail this memoir so he can vet it for errors.) Traditionally Indonesians have had one name only, but in modern city life they find it convenient to add a second name. When a student he was just Widjojo; when a Minister of the Government years later he was Professor Widjojo Nitisastro. European naming followed the same evolution--when the social unit went from the village to the city, first names were no longer adequate to identify individuals. The familiar address showing respect and closeness is Pak, literally father.