

## THE ARRIVAL OF THE NEI EVACUEES IN FREMANTLE



The crowded ship on which evacuees were repatriated to the Netherlands or NEI.

Every aspect of the evacuees' life over the preceding four years was characterised by ever increasing difficulties: war, interment, brutality and violence, starvation, illness, and death. Moreover, following the capitulation of the Japanese on 15 August 1945, instead of celebrating their liberation, two days later on 17 August 1945, when *Soekarno* declared Indonesian Independence the POWs found themselves in the even more [than the Japanese] unruly and violent environment, created this time by the youthful extremists. It was therefore an enormous relief to be chosen for evacuation to Australia.

*Winnie de Vries* recalls:

As my little brother was a very sick and feeble child - we were advised to take the first possible transport. My mother still didn't know whether my father was dead or alive and where? But we went to Australia because one of the doctors said 'you better go now, perhaps there won't be another transport'. We left on the *MS Oranje*.

No memory is more vivid and amazing than our embarkation: On deck we saw long, long tables covered with white cloth and on it were piles of sandwiches, white bread and all kinds of drinks to choose. Then one moment when I looked out at sea I saw to my great astonishment and shock a piece of that bread in the water! I almost wanted to dive into the water to get it out... I will never, never forget that scene. We had had so much hunger!

**Hospital Ship MS Oranje**

Nora Actos' experience was greatly influenced by her dire need for treatment, as she explains:

On arrived in Fremantle where the strike was going on, I was put on a stretcher on the quay. My first meeting with an Australian was emotional. A man who looked like a beggar approached me and offered a little bag of candies. I will never forget this moment. The sick ones were lucky as we were driven soon by ambulance to Perth (I think it was) Westminster hospital. Being better we were allowed to sit in the garden and I remember clearly that both a girlfriend of mine and I, pinching our arms to feel that we were really awake and not just dreaming a sweet dream.

Ernst Kollmann recalls

We arrived in just the clothes we were wearing. Neither did our family have any money that had all been taken by the Japanese.

The evacuees all mentioned that the Waterside Workers Union were on strike in support of the Indonesian struggle for Independence from Dutch Colonial Rule and as a result when their ship arrived in Fremantle there was no tug waiting to berth them or help to unload or re-fuel the ships.

### **The Netherlands Indies Welfare Organisation voor Evacuees (NIWOE)**

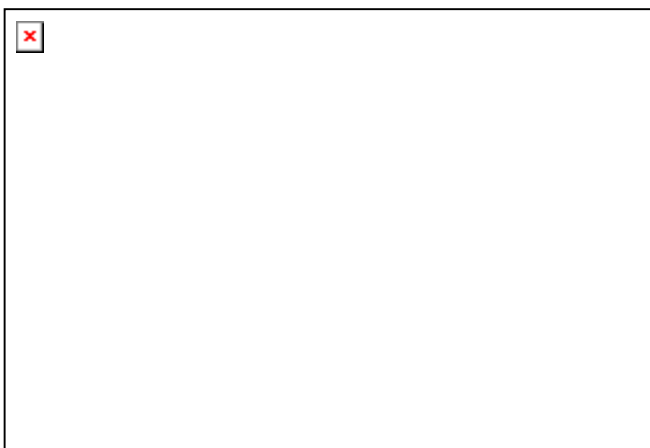
The evacuees' Australian sojourn was according to an agreement between the Australian and NEI governments, to be organised and financed by the NEI Department of Economic Affairs under the banner of NIWOE in accordance with the agreement reached between Australia's Department of Immigration and the NEI administration (see also scan of letter).<sup>1</sup> NIWOE set up an administrative network by establishing a branch in every Australian city. From these locations they could readily organise evacuees' medical and dental care, accommodation and childcare, and disseminate information about Australian mores, customs and values, places of interest to see in the countryside and city, schooling, currency exchange and where to shop for clothes.<sup>1</sup> When the second wave evacuations commenced in October 1945 the Dutch authorities were well organised and this was especially important given the evacuees health was in serious need of rehabilitation. The majority of first arrivals were women and children who still did not know where their husbands, sons, brothers, fathers and extended family members were, or even if they were still alive. Some of the children, aged eight and nine, purportedly looked four years old and there was the fear they would remain dwarfs forever. Most were suffering from *beriberi* and/or *malnutrition* and were in serious need to have their health restored to facilitate their repatriation to the Netherlands or back to the NEI.

Before the evacuees arrived NIWOE, who were responsible for the rehabilitation programs in Australia, had already been very busy sourcing accommodation and organising agencies to assist with evacuees physical, psychological and financial wellbeing. Ella Bone described Mr Jan van Helten, their Chief Welfare Officer, ...as a very well organised, pleasant under the circumstances, short, youngish man...of about 40... [with] a moustache and light brown hair. NIWOE staff had to deal with a lot of *distraught* people anxious to know about family in Holland and the NEI that they had not heard from for the four years of their internment by the Japanese from 1942 to 1945. Were they alive? So there was la great deal of work to do connecting them again with their loved ones. Van Helten and one of his staff asked the Dutch ladies who had been living in Perth for the last four years to help them. Their response was, "NO, certainly not!" Their rational for the resounding no was that if their husbands, brothers, and or fathers were still alive, they would want to spend all their time with them after such a long separation and also to help them restore their health.

### **NIWOE's Paper Trail**

Before being collected from Fremantle wharf to be processed by NIWOE newly arrived evacuees were again dowsed with DDT, after which they were processed by NIWOE and relevant Australian Authorities via a seven task 'tables system'.

Each table, from A to G representing/undertaking a specific function as follows: A: registration; B: Form A1 for Aliens plus finger printing; C: here evacuees were entered into a passbook and furnished with an identification number; at D they were registered as Aliens; at E given clothing and food & tobacco ration coupons, and at table F, Australian customs interviewed them. Following documentation, medical checks and bestowal of an identification number, the refugees were at Table G, given the arrangements for transport to their accommodation and the delivery of their baggage.



**The identity card and ration card NIWOE issued to Wim Plink**

The passbook system adopted by the NEI administration was to overcome evacuees, lack of passports. As part of this process they completed a Registration Form (Form 49) before they reached the port of disembarkation. It was agreed that this Form was to be accepted in place of personal statements on and that the Netherlands East Indies passbook, which each adult was given was to be accepted in lieu of passports. The passbook also contained a Form to register for dental and medical treatment with the *Nederlandsch Medisch Centrum* (Dutch Medical Centre) located at the Westminster Hospital, 246 Adelaide Terrace, Perth.<sup>ii</sup>



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Ernst Kollmann bij Westminster voor de tandarts



**Westminster Hospital**

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- i NAA,A437, Item1946/6/79: Memorandum dated 10 September, 1945, from A.R. Peters Acting Secretary of the Department of Immigration to The Collector of Customs outlines the policy and procedures for the NEI evacuees.
- ii Ibid: Aliens registration letter from Mr A.R. Peters, Acting Secretary Dept of Immigration to Collector of Customs, Fremantle dated One November, 1945.