

**Review**

**Jan Schneider:**

***In de hel van Birma: Ooggetuigenverslag uit de kampen langs de Birma-Siam spoorlijn 1942-1945***

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*Reviewed by Eveline Buchheim*

JAN SCHNEIDER

# In de hel van Birma

*Ooggetuigenverslag uit de kampen langs  
de Birma-Siam Spoorlijn 1942-1945*

Woord vooraf **GEERT MAK**  
Bezorgd door **HANS D. SCHNEIDER**



The construction of the Burma-Siam Railroad impacted the lives of many people who were forced to build it and it very often also affected their families. The Japanese military needed the railway because transporting their war supplies via the sea route along Singapore had become too dangerous for them. An already existing plan to connect two railroads between Thanbyuzayat in Myanmar and Non Pladuk in Thailand was revived and construction started in May 1942. It was not an easy job. The missing trajectory was 415 kilometers long and a large part went through a virtually uninhabited tropical monsoon forest. The construction of this railroad is known as one of the most reprehensible projects of the Japanese occupiers. Once the railroad was finished, the prisoners continued to work on maintenance and repair, living in the camps along the trail.

Because of the high number of associated deaths, caused by the harsh circumstances, as well as the poor quality and scarcity of the food that contributed to illness, the railroad is also known as the Railway of Death. The more than 60,000 prisoners of war working on the Burma-Siam Railroad originated from the United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands, and America. Their average death rate is estimated at 20%. A much larger group of men who worked on the railroad were Asian *romusha*, a Japanese word for laborer, but in practice these men were forced laborers. Their number is estimated to have been between 200,000 and 300,000 men, with an average death rate of at least 50%.

Eyewitness reports are among the most insightful documents for getting a sense of what it was like for the men who were forced to work on the railroad. The archive of NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide in Amsterdam contains a collection of more than 300 diaries written by prisoners of war and interned civilians in Japanese camps during the Second World War. A small part of this collection is written by Dutch forced laborers at the Burma-Siam Railroad, while the library at NIOD also holds a collection of their memoirs and books. Together with historical studies, such personal documents provide a vivid idea of how the prisoners suffered. *In de hel van Birma* ('in Burma's hell'), published in 2019, is a welcome addition to the already existing publications.

*In de hel van Birma* is based on a set of documents that Carel Jan Schneider, better known under his writer's name F. Springer, discovered in 1983, a few years after the death of his father Jan Schneider (1905-1981). What turned out to be his father's personal wartime archive was packed in the cover of an instruction book for Greek grammar and vocabulary (in Myanmar Jan managed to study some Greek), neatly tied together with red and white thread. It contained different handwritten and printed texts, letters, pictures, Japanese paper money, and a few other items. Jan Schneider was made prisoner of war in Bandung on the island of Java at a time when he worked in that city as a German teacher at the *Christelijk Lyceum* ('Christian high school'). He was widely known for the textbook *Deutscher*

*Wortschatz* ('German vocabulary'), a volume used in Dutch secondary education for many decades. In 1931, a week after his marriage to Corrie Lücht, the couple moved to the Dutch East Indies. Their three sons were born on Java and Schneider taught at secondary schools in Jakarta (then called Batavia), Malang, and Bandung.

Although their father occasionally told them stories about what he ironically called his 'sleepover at the Japs' ("*logeerpartij bij de Jap*") (10), none of the sons knew of the existence of these papers in which he described his experiences. The central document in the collection describes Jan's experiences in the different camps along the railroad line. Although Jan Schneider kept a diary while he was at the railroad, the Japanese guards confiscated it in May 1944. Undeterred, he started over, once more making notes in the margins of a book, but soon again stopped doing that. He even decided to erase these notes because he considered it too risky if the Japanese guards would discover another piece of his writings. On September 3, 1945, after his release, he shared with his wife what the abandonment of his diary and notes meant to him: 'everything is gone. Those yellow scoundrels didn't grant us anything' ("*Alles weg. Die gele gluiperds gunden ons niets*") (132).

Upon arrival in Bangkok, at the end of August 1945, he immediately started to put to paper his experiences as a prisoner of war. He wanted to replace his diary while his memories were still vivid. Although in a letter to his father he called this text a report, his sons referred to it as diary entries because they thought the writing had the appeal of a diary. Jan Schneider states that he wrote the report for his wife, but throughout the text it becomes clear that he also wrote for himself. His main reason is that he does not want to forget what happened during those years of crisis; he is convinced that his experiences on the railroad will be decisive for his spiritual development even though at the time of writing he realizes that he cannot know the ultimate influence on his life yet. While writing, he was still amazed about what his pal Piet de Jongh habitually called his 'criminal optimism' ("*misdadig optimisme*") (30). This part of the archive covers the period until 28 September 1943; apparently in Bangkok he was not able to finish the report completely. Nevertheless, one of the sons, Hans D. Schneider, managed to give a more or less complete overview of his father's time in the camps along the railroad, essentially completing his father's story with the help of two long letters and a chronological overview of his imprisonment as gleaned from the archive.

The importance of the impact of their father's experiences at the Burma Railroad for the family is maybe best illustrated by the fact that all sons used their father's recollections in their own work: the eldest son, Carel Jan, wrote about it, the middle son, Eric, cited from it in a speech on the occasion of the annual commemoration of the war in the Pacific on August 15 at the Indies Monument in

The Hague in 1988, and the youngest son, Hans Diederik, prepared the manuscript for the publication of this book.

On March 31, 1946, the family was finally reunited in Bangkok. Two-and-a-half months later they traveled back to the Netherlands on board of the MS Ruys. They left behind shattered dreams, while ahead an insecure future awaited them. Jan Schneider considered the trip home catastrophic and insightful at the same time. He called it his last camp and refers to the foolish inspections aboard as ‘just like in Japan’ (“*tout comme chez Nippon*”) (112). The book has only 160 pages, which can seem a quick read, not in the least because Schneider has a clear and evocative writing style. Nevertheless, it offers ample food for thought, remaining with the reader for a long time.

Even though he very much realizes that he cannot describe the exact mood of the moments that he wrote about his wife and sons when he was at the railroad, he vividly recalls how he repeatedly wrote: ‘O God, please let this ordeal end’ (“*Mijn God, wanneer komt er een eind aan deze ellende*”) (31). Because of the strongly contemplative nature of the author, this book is more than just an eyewitness account. Jan shows us the crucial role that his faith had for him in the camp, making the reader feel the strength he drew from religious and intellectual practices and the importance of forming *kongsi* (the connections made with a small group of individuals that helped each other) in the camp. In his book Jan emphasizes how culture and inner refinement can overcome cruelty. At the same time, it becomes clear how even though he managed to suppress the experiences as a prisoner of war, the demons of the past kept haunting him until the end of his life.

### **About the reviewer**

Eveline Buchheim received her doctorate in 2009 from the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands), where she studied cultural anthropology. She is a senior researcher at NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam. She has published on women’s contributions to empire, fraternization between the Dutch and the Japanese during the Pacific War and its legacies, heritage tourism, and the mental institutions in the Netherlands under German occupation. Recently, she co-authored (with Satrio Dwicahyo, Fridus Steijlen, and Stephanie Welvaart) *Sporen vol betekenis / Meniti Arti: In gesprek met ‘Getuigen & Tijdgenoten’ over de Indonesische onafhankelijkheidsoorlog / Bertukar Makna bersama ‘Saksi & Rekan Sezaman’ tentang Perang Kemerdekaan Indonesia* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022), which was the result of a project conducted under the auspices of ‘Witnesses & Contemporaries’, and part of the

series on 'Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia 1945–1950'.

