

Hilda Holderness nee Elias



1912 - 2014

Born in 1860 Moshe (Moses) Ezekiel Elias left Baghdad and moved to Calcutta in India apparently for the sole reason of marrying Rachel Sassoon. Moshe aged 27 and Rachel only 15 years old were married in Bombay in 1887. The exact date of their arrival in Singapore is not known but it can be safely claimed that their arrival was between 1889 and 1890.

In 1889 Rachel and Moshe's first child, a daughter, Mozelle was born Their fourth daughter (8th child) Hilda was born on the 9th November 1912 at a time when the family was its most affluent. At this time the family lived in a grand house next to the Synagogue in Oxley Rise. Like her siblings she was no doubt born in the Singapore Maternity Hospital. Finally the baby of the family Zaida was born on the 17th October 1914.

Hilda was schooled at the convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Victoria Street. She and her younger sister Zaida attended together. Hilda and Zaida as the two youngest children were according to Zaida attached to each other. *We dressed alike at home or in our school uniforms of a white shirt and pleated blue overalls, but Hilda was a tomboy always full of fun and mischief. I was more studious. At school we sat in long benches with a desk attached for each girl. Hilda would use her ink pen and dot the white blouses of the girls in the row in front of hers. She was strong and hefty and would toss the girls one on top of the other by lifting one side of the bench. She was often rebuked by the teacher and made to stand behind the blackboard with a dunce cap on her head. Her parents would cane and scold her but to no avail.*

Family fortunes were declining in the mid to late 1920's "At this time" reports Zaida "Mother, father my sisters Hilda, Moselle and her family and I lived in Katong in a bungalow next to the Seaview Hotel. The big house and the Wolseley car, the syce and the reported five sacks of money, tiffin at the Raffles Hotel, the races and the golf and cricket clubs were gone.

The Singapore Straits Times in 1931 reported that “*Mr. G. Holderness, late of Senawang Estate, has taken over Pasir Gajah Estate, Nal, Keletan, since the death of Mr H. M. Watson.*” Geoffrey was born in England 1900, the son of Sidney and Ada Holderness and was employed in the Dominions. We don’t know what the next years held but by the 1940’s Hilda was no longer living at home but was living at Batu Enam Rubber Estate in Malaysia with a British expatriate named Geoffrey Holderness. *It was a big house on the estate”* said Hilda. *It means 6 stones in Malay”* said Hilda.

Both the colonial government and British military command were for the most part convinced of Singapore's impregnability. Even by late autumn 1941, most Singaporeans and their leaders remained confident that their island fortress could withstand an attack, which they assumed would come from the south and from the sea. Heavy fifteen-inch guns defended the port and the city.

The majority of the residents of Singapore remained calm and chose to believe the highly optimistic pronouncements and heavily censored Singapore newspapers. Singaporeans were reassured by the arrival at the naval base of the battleship Prince of Wales and four destroyers.

The Repulse and Prince of Wales on their way to Singapore to provide protection were bombed and sunk at sea. On the 8th December 1941 at 2am the Japanese commenced bombing Singapore. Bombs fell every day as did propaganda documents. The air raids were followed by nightly raids for the next 10 days. As many as 2,000 civilians were killed daily as the Japanese continued to bomb the city by day and shell it at night.



By the 19th December the bombings ceased. In January 1942 the air raids commenced again. Not knowing what the future held Hilda and Geoffrey married on the 9th February 1942. At the time Geoffrey aged 41 - 42 would have been thirteen years older than Hilda.

Zeke, Jack, Hilda, Geoffrey and Zaida sitting

Hilda with her husband Geoffrey had moved to the Amber Mansion Apartments in Singapore. Zaida was living in the same complex with her brother Zeke and his family. The harbour filled with boats ready to evacuate citizens to India and to Australia. Zeke now concerned for the safety of his parents and his family decided that it was now time for those who were permitted to leave (women, children and the elderly) to leave Singapore.

On the 31st January, some fifteen days prior to the fall of Singapore, Hilda’s parents Moshe and Rachel left Singapore on the Empress of Bombay for Bombay in India.

Zaida reports “*The media was rife with rumours that the Japanese were raping women. My brother Zeke told Jack to take Hilda and I to the wharf where ships were waiting to take women and children under sealed orders to either India or Australia.*”

Hilda was 30. On the 12th February 1942 a motor boat took Hilda and Zaida and many other evacuees, most of whom were British, to the Mata Hari. Hilda was very distressed that she had had to leave her husband (who was aged 42) behind. On boarding the Mata Hari which flew the Japanese flag of a blazing sun Hilda saw some young men on board and insisted on returning to Singapore to fetch her husband. The captain tried to stop her but to no avail so she returned on the same launch in the midst of a severe bombing raid. As luck would have it she managed to get ashore and persuaded a soldier in a jeep to take her to Amber Mansions. Geoffrey was shocked to see her but she just grabbed him, threw some of his clothes on her arm and hurried him to the same jeep where the kind soldier was still waiting for them and was taken to the wharf. She and Geoffrey managed to get into the last launch and were taken to three ships – Vyman Brooke, Gian Bee and the Kuala, but the captains of all three ships refused to take more evacuees as they were full. Call it luck or whatever but it was just as well that they were denied access as within the next few hours all these boats were bombed and their passengers thrown into the sea, and many of them drowned. Those who survived managed to reach the shore where they were found by Malay villagers and became prisoners in the camps. The launch was on its way back to Singapore when the captain of the Mata Hari hailed them and took them all on board. Hilda was so happy when she spotted Zaida as Zaida was standing next to a woman with a feather in her hat who was on board earlier. Hilda was rejoiced to be back with Zaida.

The Mata Hari left the harbour of Singapore at night on 13-14 February 1942 with 483 men, women and children aboard, hiding among the islands during the day. The refugees wanted to reach the west coast of Sumatra or the island of Java.

Unfortunately, Japanese warships arrived off the coast of Banka Island on the 14th February. Next day the Japanese landed and captured Banka and the city of Palembang (on Sumatra). Thereby the escape route of the refugees from Singapore was cut off. Japanese destroyers discovered the Mata Hari, allowed the ship to surrender and escorted her into the harbour of Muntok on the island of Banka off the coast of Sumatra.

The Mata passengers women and men were jammed into the old Muntok Prison and an adjoining building which had been used as a quarantine depot for coolie labour. The next day all were marched inland to what was previously a slaughter house. It was here on the 15th of February 1942, just six days after Hilda's marriage, the women and men were separated. Hilda was not to know it then but that would be the last time she saw her husband Geoffrey. In later years his death was recorded as:

HOLDERNESS G.[Geoffrey] from Horsham, Sussex. Planter Manager, Batu Anam Estate, N. Johore. Palembang Sumatra internee. Died in captivity 28.5.44[45] Muntok.

Hilda says he died from body ulcers building the Burma Railway.

For three and a half years Hilda and Zaida were prisoners of the Japanese. Initially housed in long attap (grass) shacks, they were moved to a more stringent camp before then being moved to a larger camp in Muntok where they lived in the most desperate of situations, starving, experiencing the daily threat of the Japanese and burying their dead.

Three and a half years to the day of their first imprisonment the Japanese capitulated and Hilda and Zaida boarded a plane on the 19th September 1945 for Singapore. She and Zaida arrived at the Raffles Hotel in tatters, still wearing the same clothes (rags) they had left Singapore in. Hilda and Zaida were given rooms at the Raffles Hotel. Enquiries were made and the Hilda learnt the news of her husband's death. Zaida also learnt that her husband Jack had also died on the Burma Railway.

HOLDERNESS Mrs Hilda aged 30 in 1942. Palembang Sumatra internee

Hilda's family was scattered all over the world. Her parents were still in Bombay. Her brother Zeke was dead. Sister Sophie was in Australia and brothers Harry, Saul and Jack were yet to arrive from Changi. Meeda was in Bombay. Zaida chose to leave Singapore and travelled to Wales to meet her late husband Jack's mother and sister.

Hilda knew nothing about Geoffrey's family and elected to leave Singapore bound for Perth in Australia where her sister Sophie was living in Perth with Sophie's daughter Vicki. Leaving her brothers Saul and Jack in Singapore, Hilda and nephew Ellis (the son of his sister Sophie together with her brother Harry were brought to Australia on the 10th October 1945 on board the SS Tamaroa. Hilda and Ellis disembarked in Fremantle in Perth. Hilda at age 33 found work at the historic Savoy Hotel in Perth as a live in maid and was in charge of 22 rooms. She had a small salary but earned many tips. The work was hard.



Back home in Singapore in the 1950's and 1960's Hilda and Zaida travelled the world aged in their 40's and were proud to show off "their Singapore to their visiting Australian relatives. Their life was full. The two sisters participated in the Singaporean community, enjoyed visiting the Tanglin club, eating well and of course playing the poker machines their main vice.

In 1984 after her Zaida's retirement she and Hilda decided to leave Singapore to live in Florida with their older sister Sophie. They purchased a small apartment and almost instantly they, in particular Hilda, hated it. Zaida says "*We lived in a condo on the beach. Hot summer, frosty in winter many typhoons – Hilda hated it. She didn't want to go out and sat inside all day and watched TV.* Florida could not compare with their lush and beautiful Singapore and they returned to their home in 1986.

Sophie Meeda Zaida & Hilda



The 1990's and Hilda is in her late 70's. She and Zaida are living in a spacious apartment on Orchard Road.



The writer visited the Aunts in 2005. They were in their 90's. Zaida was the leader, organising the meetings and dinners, I remember this little ball of

energy sitting in our hotel foyer waiting for us to arrive, whilst Hilda was the quiet one, following Zaida's directions, bringing in the afternoon tea and treats.

The years rolled on and slowly their health deteriorated. Hilda's soul mate her "twin" sister Zaida died at age 97 on the 1st May 2011

Hilda reached her 100th year in 2012.

In November 2013 the writer returned with my wife Carmela for a holiday in Singapore.

Hello sir

Is this Hilda Holderness's home?

Yes Sir comes the polite reply.

I am Phillip her brother Harry's grandson.

Is she well enough for my wife and I to visit?

Oh yes sir but she is very busy on Saturday it is her birthday and she turns 101

If you come on Saturday at 10:30am she can see you

We arrive and see a frail lady sleeping on the lounge so different to the robust Hilda of 8 years earlier. I imagine that she will be too ill see us and then she sees us both in the Doorway and jumps up and with a gummy smile as she has not yet put her teeth in welcomes Carmela and I. She may look fragile but she is full of energy. She is profoundly deaf and her two Phillipino helpers communicate with her via a white board where we write messages.

We spend over an hour talking and asking her questions .

Soon after the executor of Zaida's estate, Eira Day, arrives with a magnificent birthday cake in the shape of a poker machine and a gift for Hilda She has been looking after Hilda since Zaida had died. She comes with an interesting story. Her father was Harry Dyne. When the Japanese invaded 9 year old Harry and his mother



were on the Mata Hari when it was captured by the Japanese and they were taken prisoner with Hilda and Zaida. Harry's mother suffered from malaria and was worried that she would die and leave Harry alone and so Hilda and Zaida promised that if that was the case they would look after young Harry Thankfully the situation never arose. In later years Harry became a solicitor and employed Zaida and helped them handle their affairs.

Hilda passed away peacefully on 17 June 2014 aged 101.

WRITTEN BY HER GREAT NEPHEW PHILLIP SYMONDS – UPDATED NOVEMBER 2015