

Zaida Short nee Elias



1914 - 2012

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, followed by 9 more children. Finally the baby of the family Zaida was born on the 17th October 1914. Zaida reports *"my pet name is Zed but the name on my birth certificate is Zebayda."* *"When my mother was pregnant with me she and my father went for a drive in the wharf area and there were many ships anchored alongside. The nearest ship was called SS Zaida so my mother decided to name me Zaida."*

At this time the family was living in Oxley Rise next to the Synagogue. Like her sisters Zaida was educated at the Institute of the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus of St Mary . *"I was educated from Kindergarten to Junior and then Cambridge Standard,"* *"my sister Hilda and I were driven to school by a Syce or father in a big Wolseley car."*

Once school was completed Zaida wished to become a teacher however there was no available courses so she completed a course in shorthand and typing and once completed looked for a career as a secretary. At age 17 Zaida commenced working for \$50 per month with the legal firm of Donaldson and Burkenshaw one of the oldest law firms in Singapore.

In the 1920's the families fortunes from the Copra Plantations and Singapore business enterprises were at their greatest. Her father Moshe was attended to by his own man servants called "baboo's" who at the clap of his hand would attend to his every wish. Her mother Rachel could indulge in games of mah-jong with the Jewish matrons. Tiffin at the Raffles Hotel, the races and the golf and cricket clubs were a way of life. Zaida proudly owned a membership to the Golf Club that Moshe presented to her as a birthday gift.

Zaida reports in her own biography *“I first met Jack when he asked me to dance at a ball my father had acquired a table at. I glanced at father who nodded his approval, and then for the rest of the evening we danced together. It was at that time that my sister Hilda and I made a decision that we would not just date suitable Jewish men. We would not have a husband bought for us like our sisters. We were adamant that there would be no brokers match making for us or offering dowrys as we would find our own husbands when we fell in love.”* *“Hilda and I would tell mother and father that we were going to the movies and instead we met up with young men and played tennis until it was time to return home for dinner.”*

Zaida’s romance with Sergeant Jack Short of the British Medical Corp was flourishing, but how to tell her parents that she and Jack wished to marry. Zaida was planning to break the most imperative of the family rules of marriage – do not marry out of your religion you must marry a Jew!!!

Zaida reports in her biography *“It was extremely difficult for me to let my family know that I planned to marry a non Jew, so I spoke to a friend of the family Reverend Sorby Adams who said he would help me and put up the banns at the Presbyterian Church. When I finally got up the courage, one morning at breakfast, I kept mumbling under my breath – I am going to get married, I am going to get married..... until mother told me to speak up and stop mumbling. I AM GOING TO GET MARRIED. “Father said nothing when he was told who his future son in law was to be except that I was to go with my sister Sophie by rickshaw to my brother Ezekiel (Zeke) to see what he had to say. If Zeke agreed then permission would be granted. The ever rebellious Zaida advises that “I was ready to tell my brother that I would elope if he didn’t give his consent, only to be told that she was to bring her Jack to Shabbat dinner the following Friday.”* On that Friday the whole family was in attendance, the table laden with Shabbat Food. Zaida and Jack arrived. Jack was bedecked in his finery, navy blue uniform with gold braiding. All were impressed with this good looking young man, two years younger (23) than Zaida (25). Zaida reports



that her mother Rachel whispered to her daughter Zaida *he is so good looking I would marry him..* Permission was forthcoming and the young couple were wed.



Miss Zaida Elisa, well-known Y.W.C.A. woman hockey player, was married at the Singapore Registry on Saturday to Corporal Jack Short, of the Military Hospital, Tanglin.— Straits Times picture.

The Straits Time announced: 9 December 1939 – *Zaida Elias marries member of British Medical Corp. Son of Mr & Mrs J C Short of Abertillery Monmouthshire. Best man was Corporal EG Belderson . Mr EM Eziekiel the bride’s brother gave the bride away. The honeymoon is to be held in Penang. Held at the Registry of Marriage and a reception at the GH Café in Battery Road.*

Soon after their marriage Zaida fell pregnant in 1940. She would be driven by Jack to her sister's dress shop each day where she would travel to her job at the legal offices. One day reports Zaida, *"we had a small car accident where I hit my head on the car dashboard. I thought not much of it until that evening I had a pain. The next morning Sophie exclaimed that my large tummy had dropped and that day I lost the baby at 7 months, a little boy."*

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.

Zaida was now for security living together in the Amber Mansion apartments 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, Zaida'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. Zaida was aged 28. On the 12th February 1942 "A motor boat took us 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 quite elderly aged 42) behind."*

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.

From Zaida's autobiography:

"Thursday – February the 12th. *"There were no cabins, we slept on the deck."*

Are we superstitious? Friday the 13th - *"The ship was bombed but we suffered no damage."*

Unfortunately, Japanese warships arrived off the coast of Banka Island during 14 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 captain's decision was sound in view of the many women and children on board, a wise decision when not long after the survivors of the Mata Hari saw many bodies of women children and men left in the water to drown.

Saturday the 14th – *“Early morning of the 14th Feb we were captured by a Japanese destroyer and were warned that we would be blown to pieces if we lit a match stick. At dawn the Japanese with bayonets boarded the ship and herded all of the passengers into boats which landed us at the Pier at Muntok at Banka Island. We spent the night on cement and cobblestones with Japanese soldiers marching up and down between us. Afraid to move as Japanese were kicking or bayonetting legs that stuck out and stole watches and rings when and how they fancied. We were in fact lucky as the Mata Hari was the only ship that had left Singapore on the 12th that had not been torpedoed or destroyed.*

The Mata Hari's passengers were jammed into the old Muntok Prison and an adjoining building which had been used as a quarantine depot for coolie labour

Sunday the 15th - *In the morning we were forced to walk inland for about 3 miles until we reached a slaughter house where there was plenty of water and we were happy to bathe our grimy and tired bodies. Many of us just threw away our baggage and shoes as we could not carry them. The men folk were then separated from the women who joined the Dutch women and stayed in houses vacated by the Dutch families.*

“For three and a half years we became prisoners. Our hell commenced from the time we were moved by boat (standing room only) and crossed the Musi River.

Groups of about 230 persons each left Muntok. They were shipped to Palembang where they were loaded into waiting trains and brought to a little town called Lubuk Linggau. There stood a few “coolie lines” low wooden buildings with galvanised iron roofs. This became their new camp, named after the rubber estate “Belalau.

We were then (women and men) housed in long attap (grass) shacks with only 22 inches for each of us in a jungle surrounded by wire netting in Palembang. At 6am every morning we were woken up by whistles and shouts and lined up outside while a soldier counted us several times. This counting was called Tenko. Initially there was relative freedom, then the women and men were separated and we were moved to inferior shacks surrounded by wire .

A third move to a more stringent camp. *The Japanese guards went around slapping women who wouldn't bow to them and baking them in the sun if they disobeyed any orders. We were made to dig the ground and plant vegetables in the heat of the day and many of the women were ill and fainted as a result.*

One year later we moved to a large camp in Muntok. The camp was a little better than the last, a bit cleaner but malaria raged furiously and in a short space of time we lost many of our people.

A work force of women (including myself) were made to carry rice sacks salt sacks and palm oil containers everytime a lorry arrived with these and vegetables and these goods were stored in a locked gowdown and metred out to the cook for daily porridge which was distributed to each person once a day with a spoonful of palm oil. The rice consisted of weevils and worms which we were told not to remove and to eat them as a source of vitamins. Most of the vegetables were given to the hospital and many of us used some edible greens from the hedges to add to our dish

I and one of the Dutch Nurses became ration officers and I sat up on a stool with a cigarette tin doling out rice for the kitchen according to the number of inmates in each shed.

I was a member of the rationing committee in the camp and was known for my scrupulous fairness. People entrusted me of playing the dangerous game of swapping personal possessions for food with guards and local natives despite the imminent danger of being shot if discovered. We also had to dig graves and carry the dead on make shed stretchers to a burial plot a little distance from the camp.

There were 4 Jewish prisoners, Hilda, myself, Mrs Isaacs and Miss Titch Haines

We never received any news of what was happening in the outside world. Although the Red Cross did send parcels we never got any.

And then there was hope!! Three and a half years to the day of their first imprisonment:

The first air raid on Palembang was on Sunday 13th August 1945 and the internees though very frightened were very excited and hoped that the raids would take place every night as we felt our friends were at last getting closer. We were moved soon after to a large rubber plantation in the heart of the Sumatra jungle.

Here they stayed until after the Japanese capitulation. On 24 August the Japanese camp commander announced that the War had ended (it had ended on 15 August 1945)

A lorry carrying men passed by the camp one day and gave the V for victory sign, This was joyful news for us. The guards became a lot more friendly.

News of peace came to us on the 24th August 1945 I received the news calmly and with resignation as I knew that one day no matter how long we waited it would come and England would rule supreme. People sang and cheered and cried. I couldn't do any of these things I only waited for the day to pack my few remaining belongings and fly home to my dear ones. It was good to be free and to breathe the air of freedom and the longing to get home stifled all the pleasures I should have derived from the news that until the time came when I stepped foot in Singapore again.

Dutch planes landed in Palembang and the camp gates were opened and hawkers with food fruit and drink were allowed to sell their wares outside the gate

I was allowed to get away on the 19th September 1945 and when I boarded the plane homeward bound it was the happiest moment of the three and a half years of mental and physical agony I had gone through.

After three and a half years of living in hell Zaida's imprisonment was officially recorded as:

SHORT Mrs Zaida nee Elias, aged 28 in 1942. Wife of British Army Staff Sgt Jack Short [POW died in Thailand]. Captured with her sister Hilda on the Mata Hari. Palembang, Sumatra internee. Repatriated to the UK on the Sobieski 10.45. Returned to Singapore post war as senior secretary, NZ Insurance Company London 1946-1953. On the Committee of the British Association of Malaya

The survivors were all taken to Singapore and stayed in rooms in the Raffles Hotel until we could be sorted out and sent to countries we wanted to go to. Hilda and I arrived in what we wore. After a night at Raffles Hotel I went to Army Head Quarters in the YMCA in Orchard Road to get news of my husband. On the 20th September 1945 I learnt for the first time that I had lost my husband in Burma on the 11th November 1943 and that my eldest brother [Zeke} had been tortured to death in Singapore (in the YMCA Building) soon after the Japanese had entered the island. Jack was sent on H force with other soldiers to build the Burma Railway. He was buried 23 miles from Rangoon.

Name:	Jack Short
Given Initials:	J
Rank:	Serjeant
Death Date:	11 Nov 1943
Number:	7262401
Birth Place:	London E
Residence:	Monmouthshire
Regiment at Enlistment:	Royal Army Medical Corps
Branch at Enlistment:	Other Corps
Theatre of War:	Malaya
Regiment at Death:	Royal Army Medical Corps
Branch at Death:	Other Corps

	<i>about</i>
Name:	Jack Short
Age:	26
Birth Date:	abt 1917
Death Date:	11 Nov 1943
Cemetery:	Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery
Burial Country:	Burma
Father:	John Charles Short
Mother:	Amy Beatrice Short
Service Number:	7262401
Region or Memorial:	Burma

My parents were still in Bombay. My brother Zeke was dead. My sister Sophie was in Australia. My brothers Harry, Saul and Jack were yet to arrive from Changi. My sister Meeda was in Bombay. All that was left in Singapore was a nephew and his

wife. Hilda and I managed to get some clothes to wear, panties blouse skirts and handkerchiefs as ours we were in tatters.

After 1 week in the Hotel I opted to go to my in laws (John and Amy Short) in the UK. I sailed on the Sobieski a Polish troop ship. On board I was fortunate to meet the Dr who attended to Jack (Dr. N H Thompson according to the ship's manifest) and the Padre who buried him. The Padre handed me a sealed brass urn with his name and date of death and I was able to take his ashes to his mother in Wales. My father in law was long dead. On arriving at Liverpool I travelled by train to Abertillery a coal mining town in Wales and was met by mother in law and my husband's Aunt. We travelled to Jack's home where he lived with his parents before the War at 43 Richmond Road.

UK Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878-1960

Name:	L Short
Birth Date:	abt 1914
Age:	31
Port of Departure:	Singapore
Arrival Date:	23 Oct 1945
Port of Arrival:	Liverpool, England
Ports of Voyage:	Suez
Ship Name:	Sobieski

Zaida left tropical Malaysia and Singapore and landed in gloomy London. The weather in Wales was no better. *"I was sleeping in my husband's Jack's bedroom. The morning after my arrival I headed downstairs in Jack's dressing gown to the outside toilet where I managed to lock myself inside. It started to snow and I nearly froze to death until discovered by my in laws."*

In Wales Zaida became somewhat of a celebrity and was asked to give talks to local womens groups and was interviewed for an article in the South Wales Gazette.

Used to a more involved life pre to the war Zaida headed to London where for two years she worked in a London Law firm Parker Garrett & Co, calling on her legal expertise from before the war. By 1947, Zaida was homesick for her beloved Singapore. On the 19th January 1947 she boarded the Andes bound for Singapore.

UK, Outward Passenger Lists, 1890-1960

Name:	Zorida Zabayda Short
Gender:	Female
Age:	32
Birth Date:	abt 1915
Departure Date:	19 Jan 1947
Port of Departure:	Southampton, England
Destination Port:	Singapore
Ship Name:	Andes

Her job was waiting for her at her old law firm Donaldson and Burkenshaw only this time she gained new experience by working in the Trade Marks Department.

Five years after her return Zaida had gained extensive experience in the areas of Trademarks, Business and Company affairs and Stamp Duties. Never a shrinking violet, when the Deputy Registrar for Trademarks retired in 1953, Zaida applied for

the position and was successful. Thereafter followed seven day weeks, putting in extensive hours to cope with the post war work load of a rapidly expanding country. There were days on end when she did not return to her Selengie Street home. Two year later in 1955 when the position became available Zaida became the first woman Registrar of Trademarks in Singapore. The Singapore Straits times reports *“Mrs Z Short is to succeed Mr Harrison as Singapore’s Commissioner of Stamps. She will also assume Posts as Registrar of Trade Marks, Registrar of Patents, Commissioner of stamps (Singapore and Malaysia) Registrar of Companies and Business Names for the Federation of and North Borneo. Mrs Z Short who is to succeed him will be the first woman to hold the post.*



MRS. Z. SHORT, who is to succeed Mr. Harrison as Singapore's Commissioner of Stamps. She will also assume some posts as Registrar of Companies, Business Name and Patents, and Registrar for Trade Marks, Singapore and Registrar for Trade Marks and Patents for the Federation and North Borneo.—Straits Times picture

The Singapore Straits Times reports that *“nearly 100 applications for patents were received in 1957 by the Singapore Registrar of Trades Marks, Mrs Z Short from the Colony, the Federation and Borneo. She said that most of the patents were in the nature of electrical equipment from large business firms. Hardly any small firms applied for Patents.”*

After having been employed by the Singapore government for 11 years 4 months and 22 days (having commenced at War’s end in 1945) Zaida retired in 1956 aged 42, not to put her feet up but to set up own business as Trade Mark Agent – Zaida Short Trade Mark and Patent Agent of 410 Straits Trading Building Singapore 1. For the next 27 years until her retirement in 1984 at age 70, Zaida was engaged in the Corporate world of Singapore. As she is quoted *“the only woman to do so.* She was to become a well known figure in the Jewish Community in Singapore. Zaida was to become a successful businesswoman after the war on foundations laid when her shrewdness and resource in the camps were put at the disposal of others.

After the war Zaida made it a point to travel abroad every two years. She sailed and flew to almost all corners of the world. Rome 1952, on a cargo ship from Hong Kong to LA 1959 and then on to Europe.

In 1984 after her retirement she and her sister 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. Florida could not compare with their lush and beautiful Singapore and they returned to their home in 1986.



The 1990’s and Zaida was in her late 70’s. A time to sit back and relax? I think not. Zaida and her sister are living in a spacious apartment on Orchard Road.. Their days are filled with involvement in the Jewish community, regular visits to the Tanglin Club and of course the beloved poker machines.

Family members now spread all around the world regularly made the pilgrimage to visit “The Aunt’s” in Singapore. The writer visited the Aunts in 2005. They were in

their 90's and acted like they were in their 60's. Fun to be with, entertaining to dine with, informative to speak to my wife and I enjoyed their company during our week long visit.

The years rolled on and slowly their health deteriorated. By 2009, age seems to be catching up. Finally at age 97 on the 1st May 2011, Zaida passed away.



Farewell to a courageous woman. She was an advocate for *women's rights* before the phrase was even thought of.

**WRITTEN BY HER GREAT NEPHEW PHILLIP SYMONDS-
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