

THE AGENCY'S GAZETTE

1870-2020

150 YEARS FIGHTING FOR MORE HUMANITY IN WAR

9 August 1940, the first time in...

... Indonesia

Attention! | ICRC delegate Dr. Kurt Edmond Surbeck began his assignment in Indonesia with a visit to the Banjoe Biroe camp on the island of Java on 9 August 1940. 187 German women and 101 children were interned at the former military barracks by the Dutch authorities following the German invasion of the Netherlands. In fact, since 10 May 1940, all German citizens living in the Dutch East Indies had been interned without distinction – Nazi sympathizers and their opponents, Jewish refugees, doctors, nurses, missionaries, engineers and businessmen. Most of the internees had been living in Indonesia for a long time or – in the case of children who were born there – their whole lives. Hearing accounts of poor conditions at these camps, the ICRC sent Dr. Surbeck to inspect them. Barbed wire, watchtowers, armed guards: a far cry from a child-friendly environment! Surbeck noted that even though the internees were women and children, the Dutch ran the camp in a strict and military fashion. Which must have been difficult with so many children of different ages running around! Indeed, once or twice a week they organized walks outside the camp

for the children – but under strict supervision.

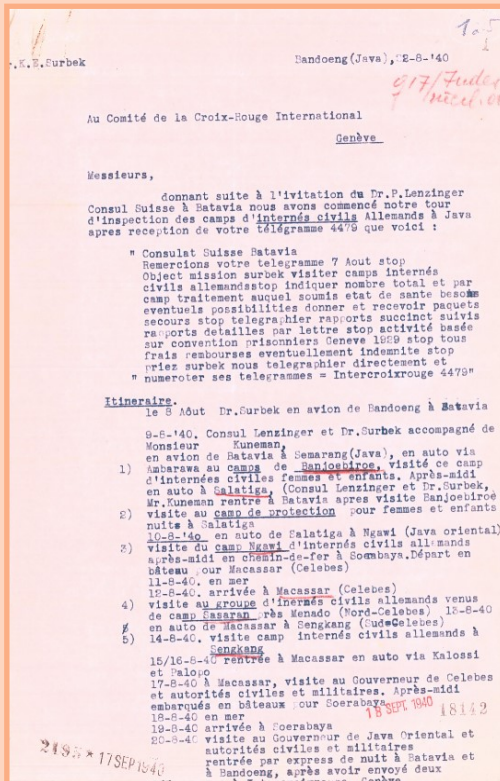
Censored letters | The internees' main concern was the long wait for correspondence. If a letter contained any mention of conditions in the camps, it was censored by the Dutch authorities. Such strict censorship meant that correspondence was very slow. This did not go down at all well. For the women, whose husbands were interned at different

camps, it was adding insult to injury.

In May 1941, with Switzerland serving as the protecting power for German internees, the Swiss consul negotiated with the Dutch authorities to release the women and children and transfer them to Japan. On 4 July 1941, Dr. Surbeck helped 263 women and 234 children from camps on Java

and Sumatra to board the Japanese ocean liner *Asama Maru*, and he made sure that the conditions on board were good. Most of the women were not reunited with their husbands until 1948 or 1949.

■ IME, DPM & DGON



First page of the report by delegate Kurt Edmond Surbeck after his visit to the civilian internee camps in Java at the invitation of the Swiss Consul in Batavia (Jakarta), Dr. P. Lenzinger, ACICR