

A TRAGEDY OF ERRORS

A quarrel over a girl between two mothers turned into one of Singapore's saddest events: the Maria Hertogh Riots. It need not have happened.

BY JUSTIN ZHUANG

Splashed on the cover of *The Straits Times* on 3 August 1950 was the photograph of a newly-wed couple. The groom was a bespectacled young Malay man wearing a songkok and baju Melayu. In his arms was his bride, a smiling European girl in a floral baju kurung. This picture, taken on their wedding two days earlier, could have marked a happily-ever-after ending for the bride, Maria Bertha Hertogh.

Unfortunately, Maria's life was not so simple. By the end of that year, her marriage was broken up and she lost a family. She became famous for the wrong reasons. Today, Maria Hertogh is known as the girl whose story caused a deadly riot in Singapore. She was just a girl who wanted to be loved by her family and her new husband. Instead, her story became a reminder of the power of Hate.

MARIA'S STORY

Maria used to live on the Indonesian island of Java with four siblings and her Dutch mother, Adeline. During the Japanese occupation of Java, her father was captured and imprisoned. Her mother struggled to raise the five children by herself. So, when Maria was five years old, her mother passed her to an Indonesian friend, Aminah, to look after. In those days, this was not an unusual thing to do.

For the next eight years, Aminah was a mother to Maria, bringing up the girl the best way she knew how. She raised her as a Muslim, dressed her in Malay clothes, taught her the Malay language and even gave her a Muslim name: Nadra Maarof. When the war ended, the family never heard from Adeline. Aminah and Maria moved from Indonesia to Kemaman in Malaya.

Then, out of the blue in April 1950, they received news that Adeline and her husband were looking for Maria.

Aminah and Maria came to Singapore to meet officials of the Dutch government. Aminah thought that Maria's Dutch family just wanted to finish up the paperwork for Maria's adoption by Aminah. She was shocked to find out that the Dutch officials wanted to take Maria away.

They accused Aminah of holding on to Maria against her parents' wishes. They offered \$500 as compensation for bringing Maria up the last eight years. Of course, this hurt and angered Aminah deeply. She saw Maria as her own daughter, not someone whom she was being paid to look after.

The battle for Maria went to court. For the next few months, the judges went back and forth. Round One went to the Dutch. The officials persuaded a judge to order that Maria be separated from Aminah. The girl was placed in a welfare home until the court made a final decision. In May, the judge decided that Maria should be returned to her Dutch parents.

Aminah was not going to let go so easily. She appealed against the decision. Two months later, the court gave in to her appeal. She had won Round Two.

Maria's Dutch parents did not give up and the case went back to court. Round Three: On 2 December 1950, the court decided that Maria should be sent back to her parents in Holland. The judge said that Maria's ▶



SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS

LEFT: Maria Hertogh was caught between her mother, Adeline (top left) and her foster mother Aminah (top right).



SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS

ABOVE: Maria in happier times with Aminah.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE

ABOVE: Protestors marching to the Supreme Court on the day of the court hearings before riots broke out.

RIGHT: Riots started outside the Supreme Court when the police tried to disperse the crowd gathered to hear the court's decision on 11 December 1950.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE

► Muslim marriage did not count because her father had never given permission for her to become a Muslim.

Again, Aminah appealed. Her appeal was turned down. Maria and Adeline boarded a plane to Holland and left Singapore for good.

The fight for Maria was not just between the two families in court. It was going on outside, between Asians and Europeans. On 11 December, just before the court made its final decision and Maria was taken to Holland, a riot erupted.

There were a total of 313 violent

attacks around Singapore. Rioters killed 18 people and injured 173 others. Most of those targeted were Europeans, but Eurasians were mistakenly attacked, too. Some of the attacks were vicious. It was a horrifying period in Singapore's history.

How did things spin out of control? It was partly because the colonial government handled Maria's case badly, angering locals. But, it was also because there were some politicians who used the whole affair to create trouble.

RISING ANGER

When Aminah was forced to fight for

Maria in court in Singapore, she had no choice but to seek help from local Muslims. She needed a lawyer and money to pay for the legal fees. Muslim newspapers in Singapore helped to spread the word by writing articles about her plight. As a result, even the court hearing in May attracted a crowd of around 500 onlookers and reporters.

They witnessed a pitiful scene: Maria being separated from her mother Aminah by force. "I don't want, I don't want to go to Holland," Maria cried in Malay as she clung on to Aminah's waist. "Aminah is my mother, she has loved me, cared for me and brought me up."

Sympathy spread for Aminah. But, people didn't see it as just one mother's struggle. Many Malays felt that Europeans had been controlling Southeast Asia for too long. The Europeans' attempt to take Maria away was a symbol of how they were mistreating local people. To the locals, especially the Muslims, Aminah's struggle was now their own struggle.

The case was also followed in Holland. The Dutch newspapers reported extensively on this issue, claiming that their country's pride was at stake. To them, Singapore was a backward place in the East, and the Dutch were losing Maria to the people living in a region they once ruled over. Several newspapers even depicted Maria as living amongst wild beasts and primitive people, giving her the ►

MARIA'S MARRIAGE

While the two mothers were fighting over Maria, it was suddenly announced that she had gotten married. Her husband was Mansoor Adabi, an English school teacher. Maria was just 13. People were so interested that she and her new husband were even offered money to make their story into a film! They turned it down.

The Dutch were angry to hear the news of Maria's marriage. They believed that she had been forced into it as a trick to keep her in Singapore. One Dutch newspaper called the marriage scandalous and shameful, adding, "A Dutch child has been treated indecently there."

It was not unusual at that time for Muslim girls to marry at the age of 13 or 14, provided they had reached puberty. To Muslims, the marriage was a private affair and outsiders had no right to interfere. The Malay newspaper *Utusan Melayu* wrote: "Let the young couple live happily! ... Don't interfere! Don't dare comment or write about Muslim marriages."

Thus, even the happy occasion of Maria's marriage increased the anger on both sides.



ABOVE: Maria with Mansoor Adabi after their marriage.

SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS

MARIA IS HAPPY. NADRA IS SAD.



SINGAPORE STANDARD

(left, above). On closer look, one sees that these were posed pictures. Maria and the others in the photos were aware of the camera and would have tried to look their best.

One picture showed Maria playing the piano and surrounded by bouquets of flowers (right). The flowers were probably arranged for by Dutch officials to show how much they welcomed Maria. In fact, since Dutch officials organised this event, they may have been at the side encouraging her to smile.

Your view of Maria's life in the convent would have been very different depending on which newspaper you read.

On 4 December 1950, the Dutch invited the press to photograph Maria in the Convent. They wanted to show Maria was happy to be in a Christian home away from Aminah. They hoped this would sway the judges to reject Aminah's appeal and let Maria return to Holland with Adeline.

The next day, both the *Standard* and *The Straits Times* carried several photographs of a happy Maria wearing a white dress



SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS

Two days later, the Malay newspaper, *Utusan Melayu*, published very different photographs of Maria (below). She looked sad and unaware that she was being photographed. It could then be said that Maria was showing her true feelings. However, we must remember that the Malay newspapers wanted to persuade readers that Maria was unhappy to be separated from Aminah. They would have purposely chosen pictures that fit this plan.

All of us show many different facial expressions throughout the day. Even when we are happy, we may look sad in some moments. And, we sometimes smile even when we are sad. So, it is not hard for photographers to capture any expression that they are looking for.

Photographs seem as if they are capturing reality. But, when you look at photos, it is important to understand the context – how, when, and why they were shot – so that you can see them more clearly.



UTUSAN MELAYU

► nickname "The Jungle Girl".

The Dutch reaction just made the Muslims here even more angry. It seemed to prove that the Europeans had no respect for locals.

People were hungry for news about Maria. Irresponsible newspapers printed as many stories as they could find, including untrue ones: one article reported falsely that she was pregnant.

In September, Muslims' anger increased. First, the British government in Singapore decided to stop the Muslim Welfare Association from raising more money to fight the court case. Muslims felt this was unfair, since funds for the other side were still being raised in Holland.

The colonial authorities also said it wanted to raise the minimum age for marriage in Singapore. Coming just after Maria's marriage, this was bound to upset Muslims. It looked as if the British were siding with the Dutch, instead of the



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE

ABOVE: During the riots, many cars were burned as these were usually owned by the Europeans.

local Muslims.

TWO KEY PLAYERS

Two Muslim politicians in Singapore took a leading role in the protests. They found it easy to influence others in the community because they both ran their own newspapers. Karim Ghani was the editor of *Malaya Nanban*, while Burhanuddin Al-Hemy was the editor of *Melayu Raya*.

In November, Mr Karim spoke to the large crowd gathered in a hall. He said that Maria and Mansoor were victims of "injustice", "harassed for being husband and wife" and "punished for being Muslims". These were strong words. He challenged the community not to back down, "because there is no compromise when our honour is at stake".

According to a National University of Singapore professor who has written a book about the case, Mr Karim and others were blowing up the issue. "Newspaper

reports and commentaries added fuel to the fire that was burning within the Muslim community in Singapore," says the professor, Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied.

Moreover, he says, ordinary people were quick to believe rumours. For example, when Maria's husband got injured in a motorbike accident, news spread that Dutch agents were trying to ►

Bertha Knelt Before Virgin Mary Statue

Standard Woman Correspondent

BERTHA HERTOUGH knelt before the statue of the Virgin Mary, beside her mother, in the Convent of the Good Shepherd, ... Road, yesterday. She did this of her own free will.

Telling me this, Hertogh, said that wearing white dresses.

She handed her Mother.

After a good garden with the other as the others.

Mrs. Hertogh had asked me to come and her. Early on Sunday my telephone rang was Mother Colombia Convent: "Mrs. Hertogh specially asking to see Can you come out soon?"

I was given a permit to visit my mother daughter.

When I arrived on Bertha asked: "Have come to take picture Not unless you want me to take some."

A small child ran to her. They played toy for a few minutes then both rushed up

later as they down stairs, arm I snatched them.

Mrs. Hertogh Mother Superior by side.

Full Of Joy

The mother in and asked: "be torn?" And her own free will

SINGAPORE STANDARD

LEFT: This headline in the *Singapore Standard* suggested that Maria wasn't just changing families – she was changing religions. (Bertha was Maria's middle name.)

BELOW: This illustration in the *Melayu Raya*, with Maria facing a church and a mosque, showed her case as a conflict between two religions. Such news reports made people very emotional about the issue.



MELAYU RAYA

MARIA'S LIFE IN HOLLAND

When the judge decided that Maria should move to Holland, he believed she would have a better life there. However, she continued to face difficulties. Her relationship with her mother Adeline was bitter. In 1956, Maria secretly got married to a Dutch cabinetmaker. The couple had 13 babies – three whom died in infancy. She had frequent rows with husband. By the mid 1970s, her mind was so disturbed that she made plans to kill her husband. However, the plot was uncovered before it was carried out. The judges eventually let her off because of her troubled background. Later on, Maria divorced her husband and migrated to the United States. There, she worked odd jobs as a janitor, cook and domestic helper to make ends meet. Maria died in 2009 in Holland because of leukaemia.

began smashing the vehicles around, and attacking the police. Even though the police tried to tell the crowd that Velge was not a policeman and had been arrested, the word went out: the police were shooting at the Malays! Violent incidents broke out across Singapore for three days.

According to professor Khairudin Aljunied, the rioters were not all angered by Maria's case. Mr Karim probably had only several dozen supporters. "Many joined in the riots because they saw it as an opportunity to settle old scores especially with the Europeans and Eurasians who were known to be bosses of many firms," says the professor.

The Maria Hertogh Riots 60 years ago may give the impression that people of different religions cannot live together peacefully. Now that you've read the real story, you'll realise that is a wrong conclusion. Religion alone wasn't the problem. The riots would not have happened if the authorities had acted more sensitively. But, most importantly, there were a few politicians and editors who purposely wanted ordinary people to lose their heads. They spread suspicion and made people believe rumours. Only then could hate win for these few awful days in 1950.

One thing that Mr Karim said in a speech was right: "The Maria tragedy can well be described as a 'tragedy of errors'." ●

► kill him. The truth was that he fell off when his motorbike knocked against a kerb.

THE FINAL STRAW

The British authorities did not understand how sensitive the issue was. They made a big mistake that the Muslim politicians and newspapers took advantage of. While waiting for the court's final decision in December, the Dutch-Consul General sent Maria to a girls' home run by the Catholic church. Then, the Dutch officials invited the press to photograph Maria's life in the convent. They wanted to show that Maria was happy there.

The next day's newspapers were splashed with photos of a smiling Maria in church. The *Singapore Standard* even carried a headline, "Bertha Knelt Before

Virgin Mary Statue." But, *Utusan Melayu* published photographs of Maria crying in the church with the headline "I am very miserable – forced to wear a gown". It also reported that Maria begged the reporters for help.

On 11 December, Mr Karim organised a protest march to the Supreme Court. Thousands gathered at the Padang to await the result of the appeal. When the European police officers tried to disperse the crowd, the police were pelted with stones.

A Eurasian Singaporean, H.L. Velge, was leaving his office next to the Supreme Court. Thinking he was a European, the crowd surrounded Velge and began raining blows on him. In defence, Velge took out his revolver and fired at the crowd – wounding two Malays. The crowd went hysterical and