



THE HEART OF THE WORLD

By DAGMAR TORMAEHLEN

The part of the former Dutch East Indies where fighting continued longest is Sumatra. The following article, however, does not deal with the war. Rather is it a colorful description of life on Lake Toba from the vivid pen of Dagmar Tormæhlen, world traveler and at present a foreign correspondent in Shanghai.

The illustrations are by Walter Lehmann, whose painting of Cam Ranh Bay in the first issue of this magazine our readers will remember.—K. M.

"IF you are going to Sumatra you must certainly go to the land of the Bataks. Thirty years ago they still ate their old mothers-in-law with much feasting, and to this day the Bataks consider a nice roast dog the greatest delicacy." This is what a wise globe-trotter told me between Port Said and Colombo. And—"You must go to Lake Toba, to the 'heart of the world,' and call on the Batak Rajah on Samosir," said the old tobacco planters in Medan, the modern young city on the east coast of Sumatra. Here are to be found the firms dealing in the famous Deli cigar wrappers, as well as the offices of the rubber, palm oil, agave, tea, and coffee plantations which cover hundreds of thousands of acres in the interior.

Wouldn't that be enough to make you want to see that country? All I knew about it were the most horrible tales of cannibalism and wild warriors, and that sixty years ago it had been opened up by missionaries from the Rhine

with cunning and skill, with endless patience and love.

So one fine morning in Medan, not far from the magnificent palace of the Sultan of Deli, we boarded one of the open, rainbow-colored jungle busses. We sat surrounded by Malay women, Chinese coolies, and dirty, black-haired children, by pineapples and squealing pigs lying like babies in bamboo mats. The first class consisted of the seat beside the chauffeur. Our brown-skinned driver wore brilliant-hued pajamas and a bright yellow velvet cap on his blue-black mop of hair. He worked the clutch with his bare foot till it roared, and steered with two fingers while with the others he calmly rolled a cigarette or did something else. Meanwhile his head was usually turned round towards a charming little Chinese girl who coquettishly swung her paper sunshade and chattered like a parrot.

At breakneck speed we dashed through endless tobacco fields and rubber plantations. Kampongs (native villages),



tobacco sheds, and lonely European bungalows slid past us. Ox-carts rumbled by. In the rubber plantations we saw coolies going from tree to tree and tapping the milky-white rubber sap. The smell of the oil palms was oppressively sweet and damp. A deep blue sky arched over this green tropical world from whose fertile soil everything seemed to grow into the mouths of the people.

The road went higher and higher. The first tea plantations appeared. The brilliant colors of the tea-pickers' sarongs shone through the dark green bushes. Carabaos, the water buffaloes of the Batak country, wandered past us in herds, with naked little boys riding at the front. In the sawahs, the rice fields, stood bending women, carrying their babies in colored cloths on their backs. From sunrise to sunset they work among the tender green rice shoots. They till the fields, they cook, they weave the lovely *kains* worn by men and women alike, and dye them with indigo. The men do hardly any work at all. They play chess, have long arguments in the village cafés and, at the very most, go to market to sell fruit and vegetables, chicken, brown Batak sugar, and tobacco in thick round slices. Beautiful Batak women are an exception; they are soon aged and wasted by hard work.

The sawahs rose in terraces. On the hilltops palms swayed over ancient

Batak graves. It was getting cooler, for we had already climbed 4,000 feet. The road took us in wild curves through fir forests and six-foot jungle ferns. And then suddenly Lake Toba lay below us, emerald green, like a huge, mysterious eye. Smooth as a mirror it lies between rice fields, palm groves, and mountains 1,600 feet high. It looks deceptively harmless, for depths up to five hundred fathoms have been sounded. The Bataks say that the lake is bottomless, for that is the only way they can explain why capsized boats disappear for ever.

One fell very small, looking down from the rocky plateau into this greatest of all craters in the world. Gigantic volcanoes once stood where the blue basin of Lake Toba now stretches almost 60 miles in length and in places nearly 20 miles across. The sacred sea of the Bataks is twice as large as Lake Constance. In it there is the island of Samosir, which, according to an old legend, contains the birthplace of all Bataks. Science, however, says that the Bataks came in prehistoric times from the Indo-Chinese peninsula and formed the original population of Sumatra.

Lake Toba was the vacation paradise for all the tired tropic-dwellers from



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... at the market stands

Sumatra to Singapore, who fled in relief from the hothouse-atmosphere to the shores of blue Lake Toba, into a world of eternal spring. Sixty years ago no one could see Lake Toba without paying with his life for his curiosity. The Bataks protected their land of origin with spear and kris, and woe to the European who dared approach. He would meet a frightful death and be eaten with great pomp and ceremony. They were after the *tondi*, the mysterious forces which, so the Bataks believe, dwell in the human brain. Every human feast was a great festival, for the forces of the victim were supposed to be transferred in that way to all participants in the feast.

It was mainly wounded enemies, thieves, adulterers, weaklings, and the aged that were eaten. As soon as anyone could no longer climb up the steep ladder leading into the Batak houses, his last hour had struck. Then he was eaten, and his head was buried under one of the pillars of a newly built house in order to bring luck and strength to its inhabitants.

It seems grotesque, but the Bataks believed us Europeans also to be some kind of head-hunters and feared us as such. For that was the only way they could explain the great bridges which were built over the broad rivers all over Sumatra. "There are human

heads buried under the bridge ends," they said, "whose spirits hold the bridge together."

On the green island of Samosir with the mountain called "the Heart of the World" by the natives, there are 100,000 Bataks living in proud warrior communities. They fish and grow rice, and gather up what the palms and banana trees, the durian and wild fruit trees give them. In long, narrow dugouts, called *solus*, they take the produce of their fields and gardens to the surrounding markets. These are often hours away, but market day is never missed, even if it only means a profit of a few cents. One can also see them marching there overland in Indian file, all bearing loads on their heads. And at the market stands there is always such a bustling throng that it appears as if the purchases made should last all eternity.

Below, in the harbor of Prapat, the vacation peninsula on Lake Toba, one of the *solus*, made from a magnificent giant of the jungle, was waiting for



... fly across the water

us. Eight brown-skinned fellows greeted us with with a loud "*Horas*," the ancient cheer and war cry of the Bataks. In a *solu* of this kind there is room for a crew of fifty men. Every year there are great *solu* races with prizes from the Netherlands Government. Then the dugouts with

their richly decorated prows simply fly across the water.

Our crew also paddled off with their short oars in a mighty spurt. The waves gurgled rhythmically against the side of the boat. Silver cloud-veils hung over the mountains. Behind them glowed the yellow sulphur vapors of Sibajak and Sinaboeng, the two great active volcanoes. Brown as nuts, the bare backs of the rowers glistened in the sun. With high, bird-like cries they urged each other on, and soon they were singing "A Wind Blows from Bangkara..." They sang of the spirits of the wind and of death. It is to keep these spirits in good humor that the boats are decked with flowers and wild ferns. Yet these brown fellows were good Christians—one was called Bismarck, the others Melanchton, Karl, Wilhelm, and Luther, all names given to them by the German missionaries of the little white church whose bells rung out a joyful welcome to us from the island.

Bismarck had taken along a horn on which he suddenly tootled mightily so that the narrow *solu* trembled to its very core. "To tell the driver of your car that you are coming," he explained. It did not seem to help much, though, for when we arrived in Ambrita, the mission station on Samosir, there was no car to be seen.

We heard music coming from a low bamboo hut, so we went in. It was the café of Ambrita. Chess was being played at every table. Chickens were running around between the benches, and under a table lay one of the bristly, squealing black pigs that belong to every Batak village. A boy was plucking melancholy Malay tunes on the two strings of a small wooden instrument in the shape of a boat.

Then we went out to look for our car, passing on our way the church, the school, and the health station. A group of inquisitively staring children told us that the garage was to be found at the *Kepalla-negeri's*, the village chief's. And just then this dignitary came

towards us dressed in red, green, and yellow striped pajamas and greeted us with many bows and a flood of unintelligible words. Eleven men were busy fitting a water-tank onto our car. The rest of the villagers, together with a lot of men and children from the surrounding countryside, were squatting on the steps and the gallery of the *Kepalla-negeri's* house.

"I have received a radio today, the first radio in Samosir," announced the chief, beaming with pride. "Wouldn't you like to listen a little, till the car is fixed?" And then, as if specially for us, the strains of a Viennese waltz drifted across to us, drawing us like a magnet into the hot bungalow where a large crowd of Bataks sat reverently listening. A Viennese waltz in a kampong in which on market days the people stand in line for *putti filet*, *itam* leg, and minced *merah*—the three most commonly eaten kinds of dog! *Putti*, white, *itam*, black, and *merah*, mouse-like, are the names they give to their quadruped pets which all end up in the saucepan and the frying-pan.

The sun was already setting blood-red behind the mountains when our old-fashioned, heavily loaded car drove off amid the cries of "*Horas!*" of the whole village. Although there was no longer a scrap of sunshine, our chauff-



... the strains of a Viennese waltz

feur was wearing a huge pair of blue sun-glasses. He looked very impressive, and we hoped that his driving would be equally impressive, for the road was not without danger. It ran along a slope dropping steeply into Lake Toba, which shimmered like a rainbow sea in the colors of the setting sun.

He roared off like one possessed. We quickly fastened the doors with string so that our equipment should not be thrown out. At first we timidly called out "*plan-plan!* (slowly, slowly!)" But then our dark-skinned driver turned his head round to us every time and spat right past our noses. So we preferred to say nothing. Crossing many little wooden bridges, we rattled round one bend after another. Waterfalls thundered down the sides of the mountains. Palms swayed gently in the breeze, and as soon as the sun had disappeared into Lake Toba, night fell. The sawahs glistened mysteriously. The long ribbons stretched across the rice fields looked like carnival streamers. They are there to scare off the birds and are kept in motion by men in little straw huts that look like shooting-stands.

We came to a stop in a high bamboo thicket. We intended to pay a call on the Batak Rajah that same evening. Armed with a flashlight and a stick we started off. One would never have suspected a village behind the apparently impenetrable bamboo. They are all like little fortresses, the villages, with their high walls of mud, stone, or bamboo. Barking dogs, squealing pigs, and cackling fowl greeted us with a deafening uproar. All the village inhabitants hurried toward us and stared at us and at the long, pointed beam of the flashlight that made everything look ghostly and romantic, just like in a horror or adventure story.

The Rajah was not there. He had gone to a tiny village where, for the first time in twenty years, a rice-sacrifice festival was taking place. One of the village elders, however, kindly invited us to come into the village and

inspect his house. The people soon lost their shyness, and without much ceremony we were allowed to climb up the perilous ladder that leads through a hole in the floor into all Toba-Batak houses.

The houses are built on high piles. In this way the inhabitants suffer least from the dampness, are best protected against mosquitoes, and are always assured of good ventilation. Snakes and other animals hesitate to climb up, and all garbage can very easily be disposed of through the hole in the floor. In some of the houses there are a few extra holes for the really devoted *sirih* chewers, who take good aim before squirting the betel juice through them in a high arc.



... assured of good ventilation

The houses are works of art from the outside. Not a single nail is used in their ingenious construction. The roofs are made from the weathered black sheaths of the sugar palm. Elephant heads, distorted images, sacred masks, and entwined ornaments decorate the gables, while the outer walls are covered with colored friezes. Just as artistically decorated are the rice sheds, where the rice stores are kept in the loft, and whose open platforms are used for pounding rice, playing chess, and as a meeting place.

However, as artistic and beautiful as the houses are from the outside, as dirty, dark, and primitive are they inside. There are no windows, no skylights, no chimneys; only the hole through which the ladder leads up. At first I could only recognize a knot of humans sitting on the floor around four bubbling iron pots. Everyone was waiting for the meal of rice that is the favorite daily dish, the alpha and omega of every Indian menu. Smoky, cobweb-covered beams hung low over our heads. Only one little candle and the fire from the stove lit up the household. I counted thirty-five people, not reckoning babies and children or the dogs lying in all the corners. The head of the house brought us a new mat to sit on and, on a copper tray, some *sirih* for a "welcome-chew." This was demanded by the Batak laws of hospitality.

There is no seating or sleeping accommodation in a Batak house. At night they lie down around the fireplace and sleep on thin bamboo mats. In the rafters golden yellow corncobs were hung up to dry next to old, handpainted plates, carved wooden bowls, and handwoven cloths. In one corner stood seven shiny Chinese trunks in a row with a small round mirror, the toilet articles of the Batak women and girls. Very early in the morning one can see them standing at the rivers and brooks, washing themselves and combing their hair. They need no lipstick, for their mouths are blood-red from chewing *sirih*. The mouth shines like a wound over teeth that are filed off according to *adat*, the unwritten but deeply rooted custom. Comb, toothbrush, mirror, soap, and oil—that is all they need. But ornaments are greatly prized. They wear earrings the size of a hand and wide, heavy bracelets, all decorated with artistic figures of gods and animals. Their anklets, worn only at great festivals, are shiny and often covered with sparkling stones.

From a richly carved chest the magic wand of the village was brought out. The tassel attached to the demoniacal grimace was made of human hair.

"That wand is carved from the magic tree," says the voice of an old man. "For seven years the tree stood in a corner of the kampong, securely protected and fenced in. Then the *datu* cut it down by moonlight and fashioned



... the voice of an old man

and carved it with the aid of the spirits. And into the handle of the wand he put a piece of the skull of the adulterer Pendek."

Then he drew an ancient kris from its sheath and held it over the flickering fire. The blade shone like blood and gold, and we all sat spellbound. "With this we defended our village, with this and the aid of our wise *datu*. Things looked bad, very bad for us. The enemy had got as far as the bamboo grove and threatened to overwhelm us. Then the *datu* ordered us to throw all we possessed in gold and silver pieces into the bamboo grove. We did as he told us. And behold, our foes plunged into the bamboo thicket as if possessed! It was the lure of gold and silver. They were blind to all else. It was an easy matter for us to overpower those gold-crazed men, and we made them prisoners and ate them. Our village was free, and through the *tondi* of our enemies we became stronger and mightier."

The eldest daughter of the house smilingly brought some long sticks which turned out to be yard-long love-letters written on bamboo. They were preserved as valuable talismans of the clan. On that occasion they were supposed to bring luck to the eldest daughter, who had been married only a week. She had been sold to her husband in exchange for a carabao and a rice field. The bridegroom had paid, and received a reciprocal gift from the father-in-law. Divorces are rare, for only very few men can afford to buy a wife more than once.

The candle had almost burnt out when we climbed down the ladder again and went over to one of the tall sugar palms. The *Kepalla-negeri* had promised us a dance. The seductive music of the gamelan began. It was joined by the clear note of a gong and the dull thud of drums. The full moon

hung between the palms like a lantern. The open space on which, during the day, pigs and dogs dug in filth and garbage, shone like a white carpet.

Men and women had thrown indigo-blue and red cloths round their shoulders. With arms outstretched, their hands opened and closed in time with the music. The rhythm of the gamelan became more furious, and the musicians uttered wild cries. The slender brown hands of the dancers shone like writhing snakes in the moonlight. The girls' wrists were so slim that they seemed almost to break under the weight of the heavy bangles which had been brought out from the Chinese trunks.

The music of the gamelan ceased as suddenly as it had begun. There was nothing to be heard but the distant murmur of Lake Toba and the song from a fishing boat in the night.

