

## **JAN ZWARTENDIJK -- his activities as Dutch consul in Lithuania, 1940**

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by the late Jan Zwartendyk Jr.      Updated December 3, 2005  
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### **FOREWORD**

In late 1939, the Germans occupied western Poland, the Soviets eastern Poland.

By May 1940, at least 10,000 Jews had fled from both German and Russian-occupied Poland to neutral Lithuania.

On June 15, 1940, the Soviets moved massively into all three Baltic states.

On July 21, these states “requested” to be annexed officially to the USSR.

On August 3, they were.

The wide publicity surrounding Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese consul in Lithuania in 1940, provides only part of the story of the escape of more than 2000 Polish Jews trapped in Lithuania at that time. Sugihara’s vital contribution was to issue transit visas permitting refugees to travel through Japan to some final destination.

Less known is the story of how, and from whom, the refugees got the destination visas that would require them to travel through Japan.

This account focuses on that aspect of the story.

## THE PHANTOM VISAS TO CURACAO

We begin in late June 1940 in Soviet-occupied Lithuania, some six weeks before Lithuania ceased to exist as an independent country.

The Polish Jewish refugees caught in Lithuania, mostly in Vilnius, sought desperately for ways to get out, as far as possible from the looming Nazi threat. Most consulates in Lithuania's capital, Kaunas (Kovno in Polish and Russian) were already closed.

Time was running out. But the Dutch consulate was still open.

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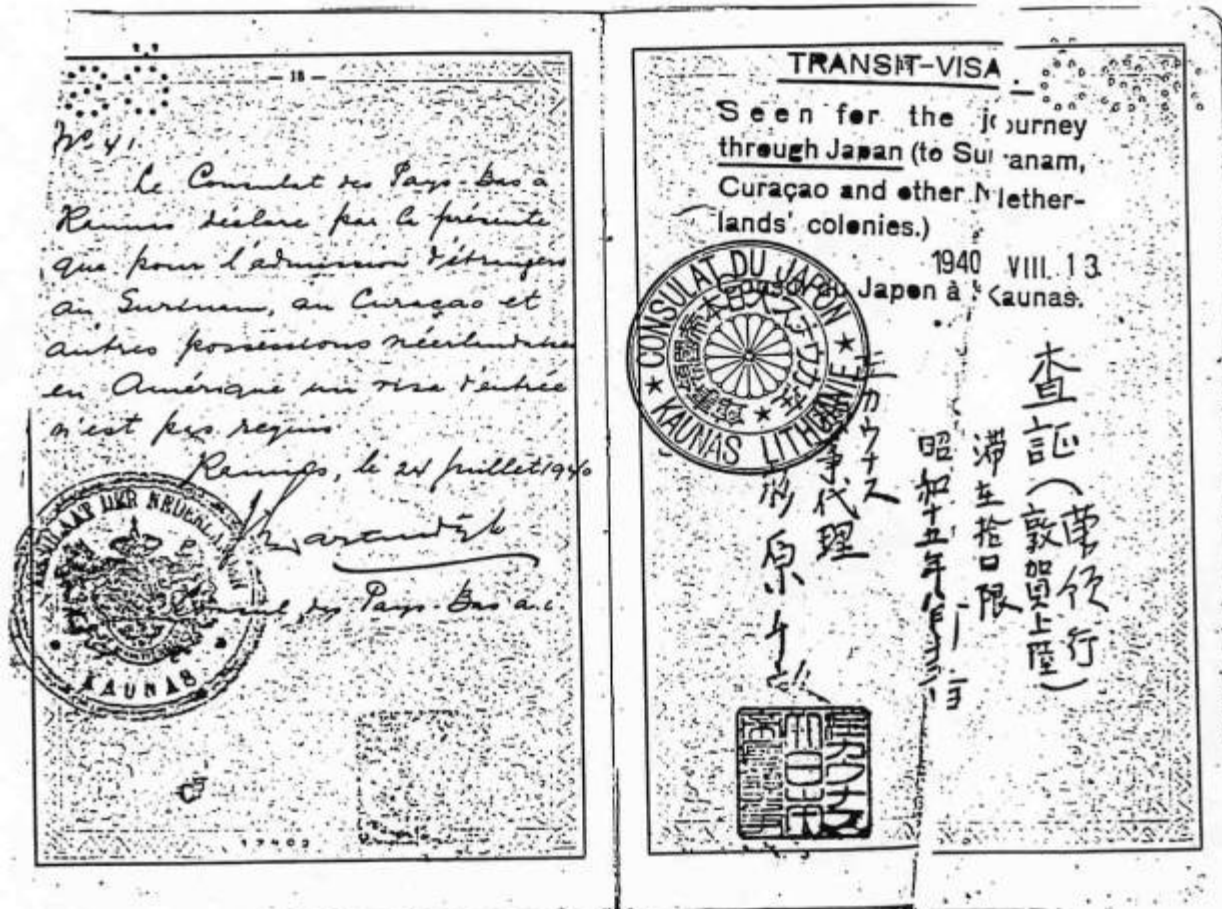
Jan Zwartendijk had left Holland for Kaunas, Lithuania, in late 1938, to serve there

as director of Philips, a large Dutch manufacturer of electrical equipment, especially radios. His wife, Erna, and two children, Edith and Jan (author of these lines), joined him there in May 1939. A third child, Robert, was born in Kaunas in September 1939.

On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded Holland. The Dutch ambassador to the Baltic states, L.P.J. de Decker -- who resided in Riga, Latvia -- promptly relieved the then consul-general of the Netherlands in Lithuania of his post because of the Nazi sympathies of his German wife.

A few weeks later, Ambassador de Decker asked Zwartendijk to take on the position of temporary Dutch consul for Lithuania, with presumably negligible duties. Zwartendijk was officially appointed to that post on June 14, one day before the Soviet invaded Lithuania.

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The French text reads as follows:

"The Consulate of the Netherlands in Kaunas hereby declares that, for the admission of aliens to Surinam, Curacao and other Dutch possessions in the Americas, an entry visa is not required.

Kaunas, the 24th of July, 1940  
 (signed) J. Zwartendijk  
 Consul of the Netherlands pro tem"

The Japanese text reads as follows:

"Visa--maximum stay of ten days--destination Netherlands Colonies in the Americas--via Tsuruga [Japanese seaport].

August 13, 1940, Kaunas  
 acting for Consulate General of Japan  
 in Kaunas  
 Sugihara"

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The origin of the "Curaçao visas" that are at the center of this story is described by a survivor, Isaac Lewin, in his 1994 book "Remember the Days of Old -- Historical Essays." In late June 1940, Pessla Lewin, Isaac's wife, asked both Zwartendijk and de Decker for help in escaping Soviet-occupied

Lithuania. She had been a Dutch citizen until her 1935 marriage to Isaac, a Pole, which had made her a Polish citizen.

Having fled from Poland to Vilnius (which had been returned from Poland to Lithuania in late 1939), Pessla Lewin first inquired from Zwartendijk in Kaunas if she could have a Dutch visa for the Dutch East Indies on her Polish passport. Zwartendijk replied that was not possible. To double-check, she then wrote to Ambassador de Decker, who confirmed politely that the issuance of such visas had been terminated.

In Isaac Lewin's words (p. 174 of his book):

*“My wife wrote again to Mr. de Decker, asking whether he could help her, since she was after all a former Dutch citizen, in some other way. The Ambassador answered that he did not see how he could be of any help, because to the Caribbean possessions of Holland no visas were being issued. To enter those colonies, one had to have a permit from the local Governor in Curaçao. My wife wrote again to the Ambassador: Perhaps he would agree not to mention at all the need to obtain a permit, but would merely write in her Polish passport that visas to Curaçao and Surinam were not necessary? She did not anyway wish to go there, she wrote. The Ambassador answered: Send me your passport. She did so, and in a few days the passport returned with the Ambassador's handwritten remark ...”saying in French that “... for the admission of aliens to Surinam, Curaçao and other Dutch possessions in the Americas, an entry visa is not required.” It was dated July 11, 1940. This notation was to become known as a “Curaçao visa”.*

Isaac Lewin continues his account: “*The passport was shown to Consul Zwartendijk, and he, after seeing what ambassador de Decker had done, copied it (into my Lithuanian safe-conduct pass)*”. The date: July 22, 1940.

Both of these ”Curaçao visas” appear in Isaac Lewin’s book. His son Nathan, who escaped with his parents as a 5-year old, still has the originals.

Apparently, de Decker wrote only one “Curaçao visa,” the one for Pessla Lewin on July 11. Zwartendijk’s visa issued to Isaac Lewin on July 22 was his first according to Lewin, but many more were to follow.

Of course, this notation would have been useless if it had included the part about the required landing permit. But without that, it could masquerade as an intended destination. That was exactly what was needed for the next step: to give Sugihara “legal” cover for issuing a transit visa, for traveling through Japan to the claimed destination of Curaçao.

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We have another account of the early stage of the Curaçao visa episode, from Nathan Gutwirth. A Dutch citizen, he was a 23-year-old student at the yeshiva of Tels, Lithuania, where he had lived since 1935. Gutwirth actually considered going to Curaçao because he wanted to go somewhere near the U.S. Being Dutch, he needed only his Dutch passport to enter Dutch colonial territory.

Around mid-July, Gutwirth inquired about the possibility of a visa for Curaçao for some of his Polish and Lithuanian friends at his yeshiva who wanted to leave for religious reasons.

Gutwirth was told the same as the Lewins, i.e., for aliens no visa was required for Curaçao because the local governor had sole discretionary authority to decide who would be permitted to land,

a privilege rarely granted. Gutwirth remembers Zwartendijk having a French text from de Decker which, beyond stating that no visa was required, mentioned also the need for a landing permit. Zwartendijk agreed that he would be willing to leave that part out, so that Gutwirth's friends might use the notation for applying for a Japanese transit visa.

Gutwirth then went for advice to Zorach Warhaftig, a leader in the Jewish community in Vilnius (later to become Minister of Religious Affairs in Israel). Warhaftig told Gutwirth to go back to Zwartendijk and ask if he would be willing to give the same notation to anyone who applied for it, and to add a consular stamp to make it look like a visa. Gutwirth made that request and Zwartendijk agreed. Warhaftig spread the word, and an unexpected chain reaction followed. Within hours, dozens were at Zwartendijk's door.

In their deliberations over this matter, de Decker and Zwartendijk had intended this modified notation just for the Lewins and for a few of Gutwirth's friends. But then Zwartendijk took it upon himself to agree to extend it to anyone who asked. When he agreed to that, he could have had no inkling that he would find himself writing about 1,300 visas by hand in the next four days (July 24-27) and issuing at least another 1,050 with the help of a stamp over the next five working days (July 29 - August 2). The highest-numbered surviving visa known to date is No. 2,345, issued on August 2 to Elias Kupinski and family.

Hence, four people were important in the preliminary stages: Mrs. Lewin for recognizing this opportunity, Ambassador de Decker for responding imaginatively to her idea, Nathan Gutwirth for thinking of his non-Dutch friends, and Warhaftig for triggering the expansion of this visa bluff far beyond a handful of individuals. Zwartendijk rose to the challenge of that explosive expansion. He appears to have launched into this eight-day flurry of action on his own, in spontaneous reaction to an overwhelming need. It required an immediate decision and immediate action. He knew he was in a position to possibly prevent great suffering. His bogus Curaçao visas just might open up a route of escape. As Gutwirth put it in an interview with a sound of deep satisfaction in his old voice, "It was all a scam."

\* \* \* \* \*

Zwartendijk's "real" work for Philips had already ground to a halt. The Soviets had installed a new government and closed the banks, causing all commercial activity to slow to a crawl. The firm's show windows were stripped of merchandise. In their place -- as in every show window in town -- appeared a giant portrait of Stalin, flanked by Marx and Lenin, against red drapery. Around August 3, the Soviets "allowed the workers" to take over the office space that Philips occupied. As Zwartendijk's Philips office doubled as his consular office, that spelled the end to his consular activities.

### **A DUAL RACE AGAINST TIME**

Issuance of a Japanese transit visa required that the recipient already be in possession of a visa for a destination necessitating travel via Japan. A few days after Gutwirth had initiated the rush for "Curaçao visas", Sugihara began to provide Japanese transit visas for a maximum ten-day stopover to any people having Curaçao visas. Travel would have to be by train across Siberia to Vladivostok, then by ship to Japan. It would require also a travel and exit permit from the Soviets.

Sugihara would have had no reason to suspect the legitimacy of the first "Curaçao visas" presented to him as a basis for a request for Japanese transit visas.

On July 26, 1940, the Lewin family showed up at Sugihara's office:

- \* Isaac Lewin (Polish citizen, man of letters, with his young son Nathan) with a "Curaçao visa" handwritten and signed by the Dutch consul, Jan Zwartendijk.
- \* Isaac's wife Pessla (Polish citizen, formerly Dutch) who could flaunt her own "Curaçao visa" handwritten and signed by the Dutch ambassador de Decker himself.
- \* Rachel Sternheim (Pessla's mother, a Dutch citizen)
- \* Levi Sternheim (Pessla's brother, a Dutch citizen)

Among all the refugees no more convincing group could have been found to introduce Sugihara to the “Curaçao visa”: half of them Dutch citizens with identical handwritten Curaçao notations from both the Dutch consul and the Dutch ambassador. For this family the documentation must have looked impeccable to Sugihara and established the Curaçao visas’ credibility in his mind.

It was on the following day, July 27, that a crowd first gathered at the Japanese consulate’s gates. These people, all Polish, all holding the same Curaçao visas signed by Jan Zwartendijk, all benefited from the Lewin family having been there the day before.

Thus, Zwartendijk and Sugihara, who had not known each other and never met, found themselves working diligently as an unplanned, uncoordinated and certainly unofficial team, writing visas full-time and at top speed. Sugihara phoned Zwartendijk repeatedly to ask him to slow down. When Zwartendijk approached Curaçao visa No. 2,200 on August 1st, Sugihara was well behind at about 700 Japanese transit visas, but he stayed on in Kaunas during August and continued writing transit visas. August 25 was the final deadline by which all remaining foreign consulates had to be closed by order of the Soviets.

The “Curaçao visas,” together with the Japanese transit visas, turned out to be lifesaving even though, of all the 2,200 Jewish refugees who reached Japan, no one actually ended up in Curaçao. About one half of this number found access to the U.S., Palestine and other destinations from Japan in 1941. The remainder were shipped to Shanghai by the Japanese government in the fall of 1941, to be interned in its Jewish ghetto made up of some 18,000-20,000 souls for the duration of the war.

### **DOCUMENTING THE NUMBERS**

There is uncertainty about the total numbers of Curaçao visas and Japanese transit visas issued by Zwartendijk and Sugihara, respectively. Available documentation currently suggests that both issued at least 2,200 visas. That is roughly the same number of Jews reported to have actually reached Japan with these visas. (Knowledgeable sources for this number are Rabbi Marvin Tokayer, rabbi of the Jewish community of Japan for many years;

Tadeusz Romer, Polish ambassador in Japan in 1941; and historian David Kranzler). That is somewhat coincidental, because several factors muddy the statistics.

A single visa could serve a whole family. Also, we know that visas were copied and forged in large numbers by some talented refugees. Some were mailed back from Japan for re-use by others still stranded in Lithuania. In early 1941, some Curaçao visas were provided by mail from the Dutch consulate-general in Stockholm to people requesting them from Lithuania. And the Dutch consul in Kobe, Japan, N.A.J. de Voogd, provided 74 Curaçao visas to a boatload of refugees from Kaunas who had somehow reached Japan with forged Japanese transit visas but no Curaçao visas. The whole ship was turned back to Vladivostok and the situation was saved only by de Voogd's promise to provide the required Curaçao visas.

Finally, many refugees who had acquired Curaçao and Japanese visas in Kaunas did not dare ask the Soviets for an exit visa for fear of ending up in Siberia; most of these no doubt perished at the hands of the Nazis.

All these factors confuse the connection between visas issued and actual escapees. On balance, however, it happens that the number of Jews reaching Japan roughly corresponds to the number of visas issued by the consuls: about 2,200.

Practically all those who made it to Japan were Polish Jews who had fled to Lithuania. Baltic Jews were not allowed to leave as new citizens of the USSR since August 3, 1940.

Those who reached Japan included an "Orthodox group consisting of over 400 Talmudic students, faculty members and two groups of rabbis. Among these was the only complete yeshiva saved from the Nazi destruction, the Mirrer Yeshiva, with its 250 students and faculty, one of the oldest of Europe's yeshivot... These refugees from Poland's cultural centers truly comprised an elite of East European Jewry, in all its partisan divisions" (Kranzler, "Japanese, Nazis and Jews," Yeshiva University Press, New York, 1976, p.348). They were among the group sent to Shanghai in late 1941, to be stranded there until the end of World War II.

In mid-1941, the Nazis overran Lithuania and started mass killings of Jews there.

### **FEARS OF ZWARTENDIJK IN KAUNAS**

By mid-July, 1940, Kaunas had become a chaotic and dangerous city. Zwartendijk had already decided that he and his family should leave and return to Holland, but ironically the Soviets were not forthcoming in giving him an exit visa. He had no diplomatic immunity as Dutch consul, inasmuch as Holland and the USSR had no diplomatic relations at the time.

His landlord, a Lithuanian professor of history, came to say farewell, with his tearful wife and 5-year-old daughter, as they were leaving on very short notice for Siberia with one small valise. His crime was being an intellectual and therefore unreliable. The same fate awaited many of the professor's colleagues.

Zwartendijk started to worry seriously about being sent to Siberia as well by the ever-unpredictable Soviets, for possibly causing them irritating trouble by issuing all those sham visas to Polish Jews. He sent his family to the country, some 60 miles away, along the Memel River, for greater safety, and came to join them on weekends only. By mid-August, the Soviets set up a huge army encampment across the river from where we stayed, so he took us back again to Kaunas. We had to bivouac in an empty house, as the furniture had been shipped to Holland, while an exit visa for the whole family was still being withheld.

Toward mid-August the Dutch ambassador decided that all ambassadorial and consular files be destroyed. I recall vividly that, at age 11, I was allowed to help with burning all the papers and documents regarding my father's consular actions in a small potbellied stove in the heat of summer. Whatever de Decker had in his files about the episode was destroyed as well. Neither de Decker nor Zwartendijk wrote a word about it to the Dutch Foreign Affairs Ministry in exile in London, so that its files contain nothing on it.

Finally, the Soviet exit visa came through, and the Zwartendijk family left by train to Holland in early September 1940. We

spent the night in Berlin, hearing our first air-raid siren; allied bombers had recently started to make nocturnal visit.

## **FEARS IN HOLLAND**

Zwartendijk spent the entire war, from September 1940 on, in Holland, working for Philips.

During the war, he spoke to no one in Holland about his consular activities in Kaunas for fear that the Gestapo might find out what he had done. After all, in German eyes, Zwartendijk had had no legitimate basis for taking on a Dutch consular post in June 1940, answering to the Dutch government-in-exile in London and carrying out consular activities of any kind, let alone writing sham visas to help Polish Jews escape from Europe, especially Polish Torah-scholars that the Nazis were determined to prevent from escaping and rejuvenating Judaism elsewhere.

His most frightening experience was when two Gestapo officers came to see him one time in Holland at home. He feared the worst--that they had found out about the Kaunas affair. But it turned out that the Germans had killed an old friend of his from Prague “trying to escape” in Romania (“auf der Flucht erschossen”--a common German euphemism then for, e.g., tortured to death during interrogation). This man had Zwartendijk’s name and address in his pocket. There was no connection with Kaunas and there were no further consequences of this visit. It was nerve-wracking because drawing attention for any reason meant scrutiny of Gestapo files. Miraculously, the Gestapo file on his Kaunas activities was not at hand in Holland. Zwartendijk did not feel safe until the Allied liberators arrived in southern Holland in September 1944.

## **AFTERMATH**

After World War II, Philips sent Zwartendijk to Athens in 1946 as its director for Greece. He retired and returned to Holland in 1956. During all this time his silence about his Kaunas activities continued.

In fact, he never mentioned the episode until he was asked by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs about it in 1963. The Ministry had been in the dark until alerted by an article in the B’nai B’rith Messenger of Los Angeles calling him the “Angel of

Curaçao.” No one could remember his name. Some refugees thought his name might be “Philips Radio.”

Zwartendijk's reaction was twofold: 1) he was delighted to learn that some people had actually escaped, and 2) he winced at being called “Angel of Curaçao.”

His interest focused on hearing how many Jews actually escaped and where they ended up. In 1963, when he received no replies at all to his inquiries, he was surprised and disappointed, but disinclined to pursue it further. He discouraged me from pursuing it as well, preferring to leave it alone. He did not wish to be honored or even praised for simply acting as a decent human being.

I continued to make inquiries anyway, hoping to save the story from total oblivion. Finally, through the mediation of Ernest Heppner of Indianapolis in January 1976, contact was made with historian David Kranzler of New York, who knew that at least 2,000 were saved with the help of the Curaçao visas. Zwartendijk, by then afflicted with terminal cancer, received this news with pleased astonishment. It was not until this point that his youngest son Robert, at age 36 and born in Kaunas, first heard of the Curaçao visa affair, even though he had always had a close relationship with his father.

Finally, in September 1976, a letter came from Rabbi Marvin Tokayer in Kobe, Japan, showing breakdowns according to age, gender, profession and further destination of the 2,178 Jews he said had reached Japan from Lithuania. That was the information Zwartendijk had asked for in 1963, but it came too late. It arrived on the very day he was buried.

Nathan Gutwirth, living in Antwerp, had found Zwartendijk's phone number in nearby Rotterdam and called him once in 1971. None of the other survivors who had escaped with the aid of his Curaçao visa contacted Zwartendijk.

It was not until 1996, twenty years after his death, that his consular role was first publicly commemorated. Rabbi Ronald Gray of Boys Town Jerusalem, many of whose staff were taught by survivors with Curaçao visas, organized a tribute to Zwartendijk in Jerusalem and New York, and the school founded

an Institute for Humanitarian Ethics and Values as a memorial to him.

On October 20, 1997, Yad Vashem bestowed on Jan Zwartendijk the title of "Righteous Among the Nations" for his rescue activities in Lithuania in 1940.

The US Holocaust Memorial Museum has just finished an online version of the "Flight and Rescue" exhibition in 2001. It is excerpted from that exhibition and the book. The link: [http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/flight\\_rescue/](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/flight_rescue/)

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From: homanli@aol.com [mailto:homanli@aol.com]  
Sent: Saturday, February 28, 2015 2:17 PM  
To: danny@spungenfoundation.org; lottedoc@prodigy.net  
Cc: spbaykatz@comcast.net; marcus.audrey2@gmail.com  
Subject: Re: Sept. 2015 joint WJC and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office event on Shanghai Liberation

Dear All: No surprise that everyone is jumping on the bandwagon and pumping up the propaganda for the 70th anniversary. No surprise that there is no mention of my father. China wants all the credit to go to Shanghai and the Chinese people, not to an individual diplomat who worked for the Nationalist government and disobeyed orders, even though he put Shanghai on the map for refugees.

The irony of course, is that the parents of Israel Singer, the former secretary general of the WJC, were saved by my father and weathered the war in Cuba before coming to the US. But then, Israel Singer had a spectacular falling out with the WJC a few years ago.

As to Chuine Sugihara, he issued some 2000 transit visas based on some 2000 bogus "end destination" visas issued by the Dutch Consul in Lithuania Jan Zwartendijk, whose crucial role is unfortunately largely neglected in any mention of this history. These documents allowed some 2,200 refugees to flee to Kobe, Japan. From there, with the help of the local Jewish community, half obtained visas to Australia, the US and elsewhere. The remaining half, including Orthodox Jews from the Mirrer Yeshiva, could not obtain visas elsewhere and were deported by the Japanese to the Shanghai Ghetto. Please click on the following link for a fact based history ( The USHMM also has an accurate history of the flight of Polish Jews at that time.)

[http://remember.org/unite/jan\\_zwartendijk\\_2005.html](http://remember.org/unite/jan_zwartendijk_2005.html)

As a journalist by training, I am a "just the facts, ma'am" type. If you are going to bring balance to the story, it is crucial to get the facts right and to recognize feel- good propaganda - as dazzling as it can be - when you see it.

Cheers, Manli