

The Holland House (part 1)

Source: The Van der Sloot Archive

法官狄

When Robert van Gulik became Her Majesty's ambassador in Japan, one of his major personal goals was strengthening the cultural ties between Japan and The Netherlands. This newsletter describes the very first attempt by Van Gulik to establish a Dutch cultural foothold in Decima, historically a very important location for Dutch-Japanese relations.

But before we get to that, I can't resist the urge to cite a passage from *Haat en Liefde voor Japan* where Van der Sloot recalls his first encounter with Van Gulik (pp. 114–6). At the time, he was working for NATO in Paris. The translation is mine.

Journey to The Hague

“It was towards the beginning of spring that I received a phone call. I had to present myself at the department of documentation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I thought it a bit strange to be invited to that department. In the early hours of the morning I took a train from Paris that in those days took some eight hours to get to The Hague.

That afternoon I was introduced to Doctor Robert van Gulik, a very tall fellow whose face reminded me of my father's. He was an esteemed sinologist who amongst other things wrote mystery novels based on ancient Chinese texts, had translated important texts and had published many scientific works in both Japanese and Chinese. He could read and write both languages. Hij would be appointed ambassador in Japan in January 1965. Of course, at that moment I had no idea of all this. I had heard his name, but didn't make the connection at the time.

Speak Japanese

He addressed me in Japanese and showed me a newspaper article written in that language, asking me if I could translate it. I said I would need a dictionary to translate it literally, but I could describe the gist of the story. It almost seemed like an exam, some sort of test. He vaguely mumbled I had done fairly well or words to that effect. Then we said goodbye, without the goal of the meeting becoming clear to me. That happened much later, when I met Van Gulik again in Japan. He had wanted to ascertain my ability to speak Japanese. Because that was the problem, just as it had been at Leiden University: many people who had studied Japanese could read it well but could hardly speak it, other than a few common phrases of politeness.”



Decima

Van Gulik arrived in Japan on 12 February 1965, accompanied by his wife and his daughter Pauline. Charles van der Sloot fondly remembers: “With the arrival of Dr. Van Gulik, an entirely new world opened for me. I have learned so much from him.”

It didn't take long for Van Gulik to get settled in:

Right from the start, Van Gulik made his plans very clear. First of all he wanted to establish a *Holland House* in Nagasaki, the place where the Dutch had been and traded for centuries (Decima). Van Gulik believed that The Netherlands should invest much more in a museum that would represent the historical ties between Japan and The Netherlands. Throughout the centuries, the Japanese had shown much respect for Dutch contributions in medicine, the military, shipbuilding and trade.

Haat en Liefde voor Japan, pp. 125–8

It isn't mentioned in Van der Sloot's biography, but a couple of documents in his archive show



that Van Gulik had even spotted a particular building on Decima that he considered suitable for converting into a cultural institute. He decided to write a letter to the owner, a Yorkshire gentleman called Ringers.

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

Tokyo, 26th of October 1965.

S.A. Ringers Esq.,
"The Hall"
The Hunter's Hill,
Sinnington, Yorkshire.
GREAT BRITAIN.

Dear Mr. Ringers,

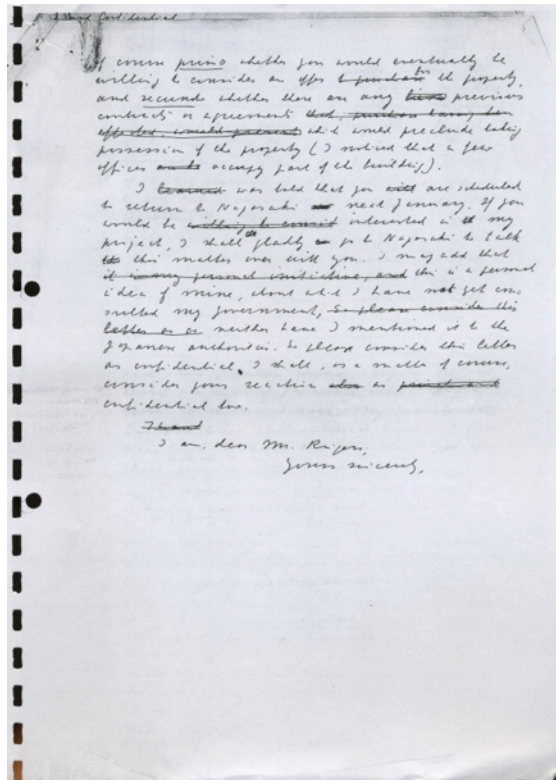
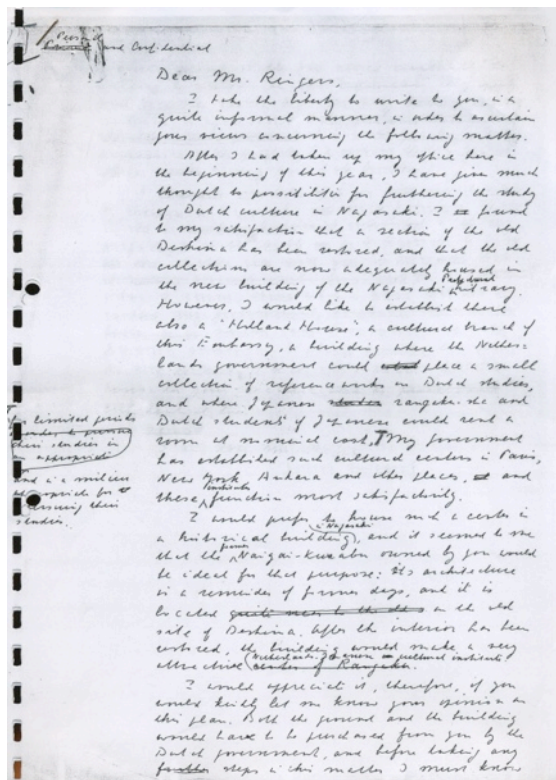
I take the liberty to write to you, in a quite informal manner, in order to ascertain your views concerning the following matter.

After I had taken up my office here in the beginning of this year, I have given much thought to possibilities for furthering the study of Dutch culture in Nagasaki. I found to my satisfaction that a section of the old Deshima has been restored, and that the old collections are now adequately housed in the new building of the Nagasaki Prefectural Library. However, I would like to establish there also a "Holland House", a cultural branch of this Embassy, a building where the Netherlands government could place a small collection of reference works on Dutch studies, and where Japanese rangaku-sha and Dutch students of Japanese could rent a room at nominal cost, for limited periods and in a milieu appropriate for pursuing their studies. My government has established such cultural centers in Paris, New York, Ankara and other places, and these institutes function most satisfactorily.

I would prefer to house such a center in a historical building in Nagasaki, and it seemed to me that the former Naigai-Kurabu owned by you would be ideal for that purpose: its architecture is a reminder of former days, and it is located on the old site of Deshima. After the interior has been restored, the building would make a very attractive Netherlands-Japanese cultural institute.

I would appreciate it, therefore, if you would kindly let me know your opinion on this plan. Both the ground and the building would have to be purchased from you by the Dutch Government, and before taking any steps in this matter I must know of course primo whether you would eventually be willing to consider an offer for the property, and secundo whether there are any previous contracts or agreements which would preclude taking possession of the property (I noticed that a few offices occupy part of the building).

I was told that you are scheduled to return to Nagasaki next January. If you would be interested in my project, I shall gladly go to



Nagasaki to talk this matter over with you. I may add that this is a personal idea of mine, about which I have not yet consulted my Government, neither have I mentioned it to the Japanese authorities. So please consider this letter as confidential. I shall, as a matter of course, consider your reaction as confidential too.

I am, dear Mr. Ringers,

Yours sincerely,

[RVG]

高羅佩