MORE THAN MERCHANTS

A History of the German-speaking Community in Penang, 1800s – 1940s

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One hundred years ago, the port of Penang attracted German and Swiss traders to make their fortunes here. This mercantile community had their own German club, beautiful suburban residences and prominent trading offices along the harbour front.

They made remarkable contributions to public life, engineering, architecture, photography and postcard publishing in this part of British Malaya, and unduly influenced Anglo-Siamese politics in Southern Thailand.

The S.M.S. Emden's daring raid on the Penang harbour during the First World War is often recounted, but less well known is the fact that Penang served as a secret U-boat base during the Second World War.

More Than Merchants relates the social history of the German-speaking community in Penang through the stories of individuals, families and companies. Also featured are famous visitors to Penang such as Karl May, Count Friedrich M. von Hochberg, Hans Sturzenegger and Herman Hesse.
U-boat Base, Penang

At the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the ‘U-boat peril’ menaced international shipping. Travellers sailing westward from Penang were afraid their ship might encounter German submarines which destroyed Allied merchant ships using ‘wolfpack’ tactics. News about the predator U-boats excited the popular imagination, and in Malay the word was translated as kapal yu – literally the ‘shark’ boat. Raja Shahebuddin, a pilgrim from Perak leaving for Makkah from the port of Penang in 1940 wrote a poem about it in Jawi script.

Selamat tinggal Tanah Melayu
Sahaya belayar berasa sayu
Umpama daun badanku layu
Takut berjumpa kapal 'yu'

Farewell to Malaya! I am sailing hither
With a tinge of sorrow, a lump in my throat
Just like a leaf, my frail body withers
Terrified of meeting a U-boat!

Yu kapal penyelam
Dipunyai Jerman timbul tenggelam
Mengambil musuhnya di lautan dalam
Di waktu siang ataupun silam'

The U-boat is a German submarine,
which rises from the sea and sinks out of sight.
Hunting its enemies in deep oceans.
In the brightness of day or in the dark night.

When the Japanese attacked the Peninsula, the British evacuated their forces, leaving the people of Malaya to suffer the bitter years of the Japanese Occupation (December 1941–1945). To the Malayan people, the Japanese were the oppressors, and the Germans were the allies of the Japanese, but Hitler’s Reich and the European war seemed very far away. The Kriegsmarine – the Navy of the Third Reich – established a secret U-boat base in Penang, but few locals were even aware of its presence.
During the Second World War, Penang served as the Far East base for Japanese submarines and German U-boats which terrorised the Allied lines of communication across the Indian Ocean.

In February 1942, the Japanese made Penang their submarine base, under the Island Commander Admiral Uzuki. Japanese submarines bound for German-occupied Europe fuelled and departed from Penang.

In early 1943, German U-boats began to operate in the Indian Ocean. By the end of the year, the German Navy made Japanese-occupied Penang the first port of call and the principal base for U-boats in the Far East. Dennis Gunton, who wrote a book entitled *The Penang Submarines* (1970) noted that this was 'the only operational example of German/Japanese co-operation' during the Second World War.²

As early as November 1942, the German Naval Attaché in Tokyo, Admiral Paul Wenneker, had suggested that German naval bases be established within selected Japanese ports.³ The Germans also

U-boats at Swettenham Pier, Penang. U-183 in the foreground, and U-188 and U-532 behind it. They belong to the first wave of monsoon boats that began to arrive in Penang on 30 October 1943. A Japanese submarine is moored offshore.

Kapitänleutnant Wilhelm Dommes, Commander of U-base, Penang.

Right, above, U-532. Right, below, U-183 off the Penang coast. Gunong Jeral can be seen in the background. Both U-boats carried out patrol operations from Penang.

The U-178 finally arrived in Penang in late August, after 152 days at sea, and its commander Kptlt. Wilhelm Dommes, a recipient of the Knights Cross, became commander of German U-base operations in Penang, with satellite facilities in Singapore, Djakarta, Surabaya and Kobe. He was assigned to prepare the base for the Monsumboote – these referred to U-boats that operated in the Far East and the Indian Ocean.

In April 1943, the U-178 was sent to Penang to establish the U-base there. However, the first German U-boat to dock at Penang, on 15 July 1943, was U-511, commanded by Kptlt. Fritz Schneewind. It was one of two U-boats presented by Germany to Japan for copying. While his submarine went on to Kobe, Schneewind took temporary charge of U-base Penang as senior officer.

The first wave of 11 'monsoon boats' were sent out to Penang from French, German and Norwegian bases in June-July 1943. Only four arrived in Penang, in October-November 1943. They were U-188 (commanded by Kptlt. Siegfried Lüdden), U-168 (Kptlt. Helmuth Pick), U-532 (Frgkpt. Otto Heinrich Junker) and U-183 (Krvkpt. Heinrich Schäfer).^4 Worn out after a long voyage, Schäfer was replaced by Schneewind as commander of U-183.
The size of the Penang flotilla at any one time was limited to five U-boats only due to the dockyard capacity. The Germans faced innumerable difficulties from the start. Japanese-German cooperation was fraught with miscommunication. The Japanese commander of submarines was an Admiral whereas the German commander was a Lieutenant-Commander. Domnes's designated replacement, Kptlt. Herbert Kuppsch, went down with his submarine in the Atlantic, thus depriving Penang of its first Commander.

By March 1943, Krvkpt. Wolfgang Erhardt had become commander of all Kriegsmarine bases in Malaya and Singapore, exercising his office from Singapore. In April 1943, the German installation at Penang (Stützpunkt Paul) received a new commander.
Apart from the German U-boats, the Penang base also served three UITs, the Italian Unterseeboot. These were ex-Italian submarines commissioned into German service on 10 September 1943 following the Italian capitulation, and were mainly used as transport ships. Under the command of Oblt. Werner Striegler, UIT-23 (ex-\textit{Giuliano}) was dispatched to Europe via Penang in February 1944, but was torpedoed by H.M.S. \\textit{Tallyho} and sunk in the Straits of Malacca.

Survivors were flown to Penang, lashed to the floats of an Arado 196 float plane sent out to look for the U-boat. Altogether 26 dead and 14 survivors were recorded. Three airplanes - two Arado 196 single-engined float planes taken from an armed German auxiliary and a Japanese Reishiki flying boat - were operated by the Germans from the Japanese Imperial Airways base at Glugor.

By then, the effort had gradually shifted from combat missions to transport missions for conveying badly needed war supplies, such as tungsten, rubber, tin and quinine, from the Far East to Europe. Operational U-boats were forced to carry cargo and lost much of their offensive efficiency. Commanded by ace commander Kptlt. Alfred Eck, the U-510 - type IXC, of 1,120 tons and 13,000 miles range - had sunk five ships in the Indian Ocean en route to Penang.

The UIT-23 (ex-\textit{Giuliano}) was sunk in the Straits of Malacca. It was one of the four ex-Italian submarines commissioned by the Germans.

Two Arado AR 196 single-engined combat float planes (like the one pictured here) and a Japanese Reishiki flying boat were operated from the Imperial Airways base at Glugor.

U-178 left Penang for Europe in February 1944. Meanwhile, four more German submarines which formed a 'second monsoon group' had left European ports in late 1943. Three of them fell foul of the increasingly tenacious grip of U.S. air power in the Atlantic. The one U-boat to reach Penang was U-510, lying up at Swettenham Pier in April 1944. Commanded by ace commander Kptlt. Alfred Eck, the U-510 - type IXC, of 1,120 tons and 13,000 miles range - had sunk five ships in the Indian Ocean en route to Penang.
Three main difficulties impeded the free use of Penang as an Axis submarine base. The greatest threat was the growing anti-submarine potential of the Allies. The Indian Ocean had become as dangerous for U-boats as the Atlantic, and supply ships could no longer safely operate in the Far East.

The second difficulty concerned manpower and material shortages. Lubrication oil, propellers, shafts, electrical equipment, torpedoes, pumps and diesel parts—all had to come from Germany via incoming U-boats. Two makeshift workshops at Swettenham Pier could not cope with the demands made of them for the sort of sophisticated equipment needed in a modern submarine.

Finally, the lack of constant air reconnaissance and methodical patrols by anti-submarine vessels proved fatal. The Germans had three aircrafts and no surface vessels whilst the Japanese failed to organise a satisfactory air/sea survey of the approaches. Two Japanese and two German submarines were sunk as a result of this neglect.

U-1062 which left Bergen, north of Norway, with 39 torpedoes for the monsoon boats.

By March 1944, the torpedo situation in Penang was becoming increasingly difficult for the Germans. U-1062 commanded by Oblt. Karl Albrecht was sent from Bergen with 39 torpedoes for the monsoon boats. In August 1944, it left Penang laden with rubber, tin and tungsten, but en route to Europe it was sunk at sea with all hands.

Four more U-boats arrived in Penang in August-September 1944. They were U-181 (Frgkpt. Kurt Freiwald), U-196 (Korvkpt. Etel-Friedrich Kestrat), U-861 (Kptlt. Jürgen Oesten) and U-862 (Kptlt. Heinrich Timm). It was reported that the U-862 which arrived on 9 September 1944, was met by Rear Admiral Uozumi Jisaku and Kptlt. Wilhelm Dommes, their staffs and 'a band that plays the German and Japanese national anthems'.

U-852 was captured by the Allies in May 1944 en route to Penang to join the monsoon boat flotilla. Commander Kptlt. Heinz Eck of U-852, who was accused of firing on the survivors of the Greek steamer Peleus, was the only U-boat commander to be tried for war crimes during the Second World War.

Kptlt. Heinrich Timm. Commander of U-862, the only German U-boat to operate in the Pacific. She sank a 7,180-ton American steamer about 160 miles from Sydney, on 24 December 1944.
Many U-boats sent to the Far East that year did not make it; one was sunk 10 miles off the coast of Penang. The U-859 directed to Penang surfaced at midday 23 September 1944, awaiting a rendezvous with Japanese escort vessels just off the island. The Japanese authorities had warned Kptlt. Johann Jebsen that British submarines were known to be in the area but look-outs failed to detect the approach of the submarine H.M. Trenchant, which sank U-859 with a torpedo. The Trenchant surfaced and took aboard 11 survivors, some of whom made a remarkable escape from the sunken hulk. Other survivors were seen in the water clinging to the wreckage but had to be left behind as Japanese escort vessels and aircraft were already approaching. Twenty survived, but 47 perished, including her commander.9

It was perhaps lucky that U-861 arrived off Penang on 22 September, one day before U-859. Under ace commander Kptlt. Jürgen Oesten, she was one of the few boats to make the round trip unscathed.

The waters around Penang and those in the Malacca Straits continued to be the scene for submerged ambush, mostly mounted by Allied submarines. By January 1945, the Singapore-Rangoon route was closed. The narrow and less negotiable Southern Channel approach to Penang had been previously mined by submarines and so more emphasis was given to the Northern Channel, where the Japanese swept regularly.10
U-843 (Kptlt. Oskar Herwartz) left Europe in February 1944. Though damaged by aircraft in the Atlantic, she made it to Penang in May 1944. On 1 December 1944 she was the last U-boat to slip away from Swettenham Pier.\textsuperscript{11} All the submarines, both German and Japanese, had withdrawn from Penang. Of 14 U-boats ever stationed in the Far East, only 4 managed to return to Europe. The saga of the German submarines has been described by A.M. Saville, in U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, as,

\ldots misconceived, misdirected and tragically wasteful in spite of the devotion to duty, the valiant efforts, sacrifices and successes of the Far Eastern U-boat cadre.\textsuperscript{12} Other factors aside, the U-boats were let down by Penang’s poor performance as a submarine base. Penang had never been a naval base, and during the
Japanese Occupation it was found wanting in personnel and trained labour, dockyards and other facilities, services, supplies, torpedo house, fuel and lubricating oil. In Gunton's assessment, there is a limit to achievement by press-on, make-do and bodge methods and incoming German sub crews, assisted by fifty German shore personnel, would often undertake repairs and maintenance immediately after an exhausting war-patrol. Only simple metal working and carpentering was left to local labour, chiefly out of concern for sabotage.

A U-boat arriving from Europe took over 50 days to prepare for sea: cleaning the boat—three days, urgent maintenance—20 days, docking in Singapore dry dock—three days, cleaning and maintenance of the boat's outer plating—14 days, replenishing with diesel, provisions, ammunition, crew recreation, trail runs—14 days; and then diving tests. A local Chinese, Tang Theam Chye, was among those conscripted by the Japanese to load torpedoes for the U-boats in Penang; his son later recounted:

It was a smelly job... My father was conscripted because he could speak English and communicated with the German U-boat officers in that language to help procure supplies from the Japanese who were in Penang at that time... My father impressed upon me his feeling of hopelessness for the U-boat crew and gladness for himself when he saw the conditions [on board the U-boats] they were housed in. And the technology of the Germans was far superior to whatever the Japanese had. He was impressed... sometimes, he would see Allied bombers trying to bomb the dockside for the U-boats.

The German base, Stützpunkt Paul, operated a main service building on Northam Road. Further offices and accommodation were provided within the Elysee Hotel and in a requisitioned villa on Bell Road. An officer's home was provided on Rose Road. For their rest and recreation, Germans crew members could shoot, fish, play tennis and golf, or swim at the Springtide Hotel, the Penang Swimming Club and Mount Pleasure. They were allowed a free run of Penang Hill, Fraser's Hill and Cameron Highlands. Otto Giese, the second watch officer on U-181, recalled:

Only a small number of men could be sent on leave up to the beautiful resort, Penang Hill... With nearly unlimited freedom, they felt as if they were in paradise.

The Supreme Navy Command (Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine) issued an information booklet, compiled by Erhardt, and this was distributed to new arrivals to Penang.

Dress within Penang city is always civilian clothes. A special walking-out uniform (white) is made available from the German service department. To make yourself recognizable to the Police Department, each German must carry a pin of the black, white, yellow cockade.

The booklet also advised German officers how to behave toward the Japanese, that is, with 'restraint and adaptation', because Japan is 'our single most strongest and loyal ally.' This reminder was all too necessary as the working relationship was wrought with
Penang through the eyes of Kptlt. Jürgen Oesten, Commander of U-861

Bottom left, the U-boat approaching Sweettenham Pier – the myriad small Japanese and native craft keeping clear of the submarine’s intended berth.

Top, the welcoming party on Sweettenham Pier. To the right can be seen the workshops established by the Japanese and used by Kriegsmarine personnel. The fifth from the left in this photograph is Fregattenkapitän Wilhelm Dommes.

Middle left, local transport was used to ferry equipment and men about the Penang dockyard.

The Shanghai Hotel

During the war, the Shanghai Hotel became a bordello for the German officers. Jürgen Oesten, commander of U-861, describes how this establishment was set up.

...I went to the Japanese Admiral and said "I want a "hotel" for my boys", and we were given the Shanghai Hotel, which had been requisitioned. So we started this hotel and we engaged nice girls that were checked by our own medical officers. We made contracts with these girls that if they only wanted to dance then okay, they got a certain kind of flower to wear, but if they were willing to sleep with the boys then they wore a different kind of flower as a signal. We also arranged with them that while they were under contract with us they had to stay at this hotel so that they didn't get any disease elsewhere.1

In some other ports, half the U-boat crews came down with syphilis because their young men availed themselves of the local Chinese brothels.

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misgivings, even though the Japanese were instructed to extend their fullest hospitality to the Germans.

Young Nordic mariners might have proved an embarrassment to the philosophy of Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity, nonetheless crews wandered about ashore in Penang in a way denied most Japanese military personnel. Some clashes between shore authorities and seamen, especially without a common language, were inescapable, but friction was on the whole kept to a minimum. 18

Extremely generous conditions for Kriegsmarine sailors naturally aroused envy and resentment by their Japanese counterparts. Despite general food shortages experienced by the rest of the population, the German crews received ample rations, including rye bread from a special bakery, meat from a local German butchery, and vegetables such as potatoes and cabbages. Eating from roadside stalls was forbidden for fear of contracting typhus or cholera, as was consumption of locally produced alcohol, with the exception of beer.

It was the U-boat crews’ good fortune that the refrigerated steamer S.S. Marking, travelling fully loaded from Australia to Burma, was captured by the German raider Thor in May 1942. Within her cavernous holds and cold-storage chambers were 42,000 cases of canned meat, 28,000 cases of fruit and vegetables and 800 tons of flour, as well as fresh butter, meat and bacon. The ship was tied up at the Penang harbour for the rest of the war, serving as a food storehouse. 19

In the midst of war, romance bloomed between Willi Hans Böhm, a German officer with the U-boat contingent in Penang, and Agnes Vaz, a local Portuguese Eurasian girl.

Böhm was a navy officer who found himself in Japan after his tanker Uckermark blew up in the Yokohama harbour due to sabotage. The ship’s commander Walther von Satorski was posted to Singapore, while Böhm got himself transferred to Penang. 20 There he met Agnes Vaz, a nurse. As food was scarce during the Japanese Occupation, Böhm used to smuggle food to his girlfriend’s house in Sungai Nibong, by

Willi Hans Böhm and Agnes Vaz – their wedding photo in 1946, and during their 50th anniversary in 1996.

Photographs courtesy of Willi Goya.
bicycle. His son Willi Goya noted that Böhm had to be very careful:

They faced a lot of resistance because it was very difficult for a local girl to go out with the enemy.21

When war ended in 1945, Böhm was interned at Changi. Upon his release the following year, Böhm and Agnes Vaz got married. They had three sons in post-war Germany and three more in Penang, before migrating to Australia in 1973. In 2004, when 86-year old Böhm was dying of lung cancer in Perth, their love story attracted international attention. His poor health did not permit him to fulfill his dying wish, which was to return to Penang one last time. Malaysian well-wishers responded warmly when the family sent out a request for a Penang flag over the Internet, and this was eventually draped together with a German flag over Willi Hans Böhm’s coffin.

NOTES

1 Raja Shahabudin son of Raja Bilah, Peringatan Tarikh Perjalanan Raja Shahabudin dan Ratmiah ke Makkah, unpublished Jawi manuscript, 1940.
4 Many of the U-boat commanders were recognized towards the end of the war: Kapit. Demmert (U-boat Front Clasp), Kapit. Siegfried Lüdden (U-boat Front Clasp and Knights Cross), Kapit. Alfred Eick (Knights Cross), KorvKpt. Eitel-Friedrich Rentrat (U-boat Front Clasp and Knights Cross), Kapit. Heinrich Timm (U-boat Front Clasp and Knights Cross), Kapit. Jürgen Oesten (Knights Cross).
8 Paterson, 2004: 170-75.
9 A salvage operation conducted in the early 1970s by an operator named Hans Simon recovered some 25 or 30 tons of mercury from the sunken U-859. It is believed that the mercury was being shipped to Japan for making ammunition. Interview with J.H. Fribe, 2006.
15 Letter from Tang Loon Kong, Shanghai www.uboatwar.net/monsun.htm
17 Paterson, 2004: 133.
19 Paterson, 2004: 133-34.
1) p106-107: According to the information by the eye-witnesses I know, the base commanders-in-charge were:

(0) Trendtel (from Japan, but did not take over command because of a new task in Japan)

(1) Erhardt

(2) Hoppe

(3) again Erhardt (because Hoppe was despatched on U-168, but later returned to Java)

(4) Dommes

(5) Grützmacher

Dr. Kandeler was at no time CIC at Penang; since 1943 he was already appointed CIC at Jakarta.

Grützmacher was CIC at Penang as late as from January 1945; earlier before, he was CIC in Yokohama (I have got all his post war manuscripts of his navy career).

2) p108: The Arado

The picture shows dark painting but all Arados in the Far Eastern war theatre had light blue camouflage painting and no German signs.

3) p106-107: Fritz Schneewind

p107 says “Fritz Schneewind (1917-1951) ... died in the Java sea when U-183 was sunk”. The year when U-183 was sunk was of course “1945” not 1951. Also Schneewind was not CIC at Penang at any time. In July 1943 he brought ”his” uboat to Japan and was given an audience by the Emperor. Later in Singapore (not Penang) he took command of U-183.