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EDGAR OTTO TITZCK, A GERMAN OVERSEAS BUSINESSMAN IN SANDAKAN, NORTH BORNEO (1908-1913)

Volker Schult

INTRODUCTION

"British North Borneo is an absolutely splendid country. Completely idiotically uncultivated and not even five steps behind our house the pure jungle starts."(27 April 1908)

"My commercial activity extends from grocers' apprentice to bank director and I can really tell you that I am completely happy here in the land of the monkeys. In the morning when the gent arrives at his office, a choir of Chinese is already waiting for him. The Tuan comes as agent and everybody bows [...]" (2April 1908)

These are extracts from Edgar Otto Titzck's first letters written in Sandakan in April 1908 and sent to his family and friends in Germany. He describes his life full of enthusiasm; a young man in the colonial tropics behaving in the typical way of a colonial master. Born on 24 March 1886 in Hamburg, he arrived at the age of 22 in Sandakan, working as an overseas businessman for Behn, Meyer & Co., owned by Arnold Otto Meyer of Hamburg.

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A GERMAN OVERSEAS BUSINESSMAN IN
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by

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Founded in 1840 in Singapore, it developed into one of the most important and influential companies in Southeast Asia. Towards the end of the 19th century it did not only control important steamship lines connecting Europe with Asia but also many local coastal steamship companies. Thus, branches of Behn, Meyer & Co. were founded for instance in Manila, Penang or Sandakan in 1901. The company was engaged in the rubber and tin trade, exported copra, spices, skins or rattan, supplied plantations with sundry

goods, operated as agents for insurance companies and owned a big shipping agency.

How did the everyday life of such an overseas businessman look like? Titzck's private letters sent home to his family and friends written between 1908 and 1913 give us a rare and very personal insight into such a life. These letters are available for researchers in the State and University Library of Hamburg University.

Provided with a four years contract, he was sent to Sandakan. His contract included a monthly salary of \$205, which was increased in 1910 to \$215 (Titzck comment: "lousy") and a free passage first class for his six months home leave per contract. The salary was not very lucrative because if these businessmen could not live in the house of their bosses, they had to rent a house, with servants for granted, which cost around \$100 per month. Furthermore, the colonial and grand life they were expected to live was extremely expensive. They could finance such a living style only with a second income. For instance, Titzck owned a racing stable and could thus save some money.

In a letter home of 10 October 1908 he described a typical day in his life.

"Sandakan itself is a real small Chinese town. In a complex similar to Kaiserstraße in Itzehoe [a small town north of Hamburg] in the square there live 10,000 Chinese and Malays and other peoples in small houses built on stilts. Small and neat, but it smells like the plague. Behind this town the landscape rises quite steeply and on this range of hills there are the houses of the Europeans, of whom there are altogether ca. 30 in this place. [...]

The branch here consists of my boss, my humble self, 4 Malays and 5 Chinese employees. The work extends from big shipping to insurance broker and from tobacco trader to cigar merchant. I think it is best when I describe a day of work to you, then you will get an idea of it.

At 6 o'clock in the morning reveille. Then the lad slurps his