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Stolen Childhoods

Written by Nicola Tyrer

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Stolen Childhoods

The Untold Story of the Children Interned by the Japanese in the Second World War

NICOLA TYRER

PHOENIX

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From the time I was interned and whilst growing to adulthood, I had no one to turn to for advice and comfort. I had to stand on my own feet. It was a very difficult and lonely time. My father would not discuss Shanghai or internment and I learned not to ask questions . . . My own memories are still very few, and even things I would expect to have remembered remain blank. I put this down to the trauma suffered as a child during internment and the ensuing years.

The Japanese and their internment of civilians deprived me in my childhood of a normal family life and the security a child should have while growing up. I feel that in many ways, since I was interned at nine years I have brought myself up with some assistance from various people, none of whom were very close or seemed to care what happened to me . . .

Jose Chamberlain, who was interned in a Japanese civilian prison camp in Shanghai at the age of nine, reflects on her internment fifty-five years after being freed

INTRODUCTION

The children in this story experienced things no child is meant to experience – shipwreck, hunger, death of loved ones and even of playmates, prolonged separation from parents, violence, fear. Today we would readily acknowledge that many received psychological wounds in the process. But these boys and girls returned from their Japanese internment camps with little advice on how to cope in their new lives beyond 'don't talk about it', the catch-all motto of that stiff upper lip era. As a result many of the people who appear in this book have never spoken about how they felt while they were interned. The literature of internment has not focused on the unique problems encountered by the children who spent their formative years as prisoners.

Childhood memories are supposed to be happy – 'the happiest years of your life', as adults were fond of saying in those days. A great many memories described in this book are not happy ones. Yet, happy or sad, the memories of childhood possess a unique intensity, rarely matched by things we remember from later on. I have been struck by how often, describing incidents that happened more than sixty years ago, the teller's eyes – men as well as women – filled with tears. These are people now in their seventies and eighties. 'The past is always with me,' as one put it.[1] Several broke down when they recalled the loyalty and devotion of servants, many of whom trekked for miles to find them in newly liberated camps. Their emotion is undoubtedly bound up with the increasingly negative way colonialism has been depicted in the post-war era. Its image

today is a blend of exploitation and heartlessness, which fails to acknowledge the mutual loyalty and affection that existed between many servants and their masters; many who lived through that era find this a hurtful misrepresentation. 'We can't have been that brutal if these people were prepared to run such risks to find us and help us,' was how one former prisoner expressed it.[2] Many of the memories remain intensely painful. One man wrote to me from Australia describing how, as a twelve-year-old in a camp in China, he was so hungry after he had eaten his meagre ration that he cried, instantly prompting his father to give him his portion. He added, 'After so many years, typing this has brought tears to my eyes.' Others still feel grief at yet another wound inflicted by internment – losing a parent at a young age. The adults – particularly the fathers – emerged from camp with an assortment of health problems and found adapting to the post-war world hard. Many buckled under the strain. Of male prisoners between the ages of forty and fifty who returned from the Far East, 70 per cent were dead by sixty.

If for some recollections of camp are as fresh as if they happened yesterday, for others it is the opposite. Where their contemporaries have incidents branded into their minds, they have a blank. Memory is highly sensitive to shock and, consciously or unconsciously, these memories have been excised. One man who was in a camp in the Netherlands East Indies suppressed all memories because he felt that if he had dwelt on what he had gone through he would never have found the energy to start on his professional life.

For others the process was less conscious. One survivor, who as a fourteen-year-old girl watched mesmerised when Japanese soldiers administered a protracted beating to a woman caught smuggling, has no memory of the event today. She only knows she saw it from witnesses. A woman who found herself an orphan at nine when her mother died in camp remembers keenly the misery of being unwanted, but few details about her mother, or day-to-day life in camp.

What unites all the child victims of internment is the conviction that the dropping of the two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was horrific but necessary. The prevailing view today, especially among people born after the war, is that this was an unjustified atrocity because of the bomb's terrible power to maim and abort the most innocent of victims, the future generations. The people in this story, who were prisoners of the Japanese, were aware that the Japanese army had instructions to kill all Allied prisoners the moment there was a landing on the Japanese homeland. For them, the situation looks different. One girl was celebrating her twelfth birthday on 9 August 1945 in a camp on Java, where women and children were sick and dying for lack of decent food and medical drugs. Though the prisoners were unaware of it, it was the day the second bomb was dropped, this time on Nagasaki. She speaks for the overwhelming majority of ex-internees when she says that without the dropping of those bombs she would have been unlikely to have seen another birthday and nor would hundreds of thousands of other soldiers and civilians.[3]

Many of these former prisoners have derived a measure of closure through a dogged campaign for compensation fought by the Association of British Civilian Internees Far East Region (ABCIFER). After six years of lobbying, about 3,000 civilian ex-internees, all that was left of the 20,000 originally interned, received an ex-gratia one-off payment of £10,000. This was paid out by the Labour Government headed by Tony Blair. Regrettably, about forty ex-internees are still waiting for their promised ex-gratia claims to be honoured. Many, while feeling that the payment did at last acknowledge their sufferings, were sad that it came too late to help their parents.

The miracle is that so many of these former internees have managed to put the past behind them. The majority have led useful and fulfilling lives and have raised families – with children and grandchildren who tease them uncomprehendingly about their strange, thrifty, hoarding habits. Surprisingly, perhaps, the internees are not resentful of what they endured. They are glad

merely to have survived when so many did not. As one woman put it, ‘I had an extraordinary childhood. I give thanks that my children had an ordinary one.’

PART ONE

A Colonial Childhood

1

Caught in a Net

The world is familiar with the shocking Japanese treatment of adult prisoners during the last war (nearly a third of the 57,000 British troops held in the Far East died). What is largely unknown, however, is that thousands of children spent the war incarcerated in Japanese prison camps too.

Among them were British children – nearly 4,000 under the age of eighteen. These youngsters were the sons and daughters of an educated and energetic colonial elite, many of whose families had settled out east generations earlier – as teachers and missionaries, army officers, merchant seamen, civil servants, policemen, rubber or tea planters, bankers, businessmen and engineers. Before the Japanese entry into the war their children had enjoyed an idyllic life, waited on by devoted servants and distanced from the chaotic ways of oriental society by the time-hallowed colonial habit of importing the traditions of home – British food (kippers, roast beef and potatoes, not rice), British architecture and British education. Their destiny was to take over the reins of Empire from their parents: the boys as customs officers, architects, engineers, accountants, the girls as leisured wives and mothers playing tennis, bridge or mah-jong and attending tea dances.

But Japan had other plans. They saw the war in Europe and the success of Hitler's armies as a golden opportunity to add to their substantial territorial victories against the Chinese in the east. The British and Dutch empires with their rich resources were now vulnerable. America was reluctant to enter the conflict,

and the way to a vastly enlarged Japanese empire lay open. On 8 December 1941 they attacked with unprecedented force. The simultaneous lightning strikes against their key targets – Pearl Harbor, where they destroyed much of the American Pacific Fleet, Hong Kong and Malaya – were a prelude to the over-running of much of the Pacific.

The conflict wiped out the future for many thousands of colonial families who found themselves suddenly transformed from the masters to enemy aliens. The children were caught up in this turmoil. Overnight their world fell apart. They were pitchforked into the adult world of the prison camp where they were no longer protected from anything. They may have been civilians, but much of what the military POWs endured, they endured too. They were hungry. They were fed filthy food not fit for dogs – rotting vegetables and rice thick with grubs and cockroach excreta. The hunger reduced teenage boys to tears, forcing them to root through bins for discarded scraps. By the end many were too weak even to play games. Nearly all of them suffered ill health, and not just the ailments that characterise any childhood: they suffered repeated attacks of malaria and dysentery – conditions easily treatable in peacetime but not in a prison camp, where the Japanese withheld drugs. Lack of essential vitamins and minerals caused skin and eye problems; many were covered with boils when they were liberated. These pampered children of the West now found themselves in a world of terrifying casual violence from which their parents could no longer shield them. They saw their mothers repeatedly slapped round the face by bullying Japanese guards who used whatever it took – their hands, wooden sticks, rifle butts – to enforce respect from the hated white races; they were made to watch savage punishments for breaches of discipline. In one camp all the children were made to watch a father being beaten because his hungry daughters had stolen vegetables. Every time they cried out they beat him again. In another, mothers were ordered to brand their young sons with red-hot pokers because they had broken a glass door pane. They became precociously familiar

with death as people around them – sometimes friends their own age – died from preventable diseases. One man, sadly recalling the death from beriberi of an older woman who had been kind to him, pointed out that a jar of Marmite, with its vitamin B, could have saved her.

One of the cruellest aspects of internment was its randomness. When the Japanese launched their blitzkrieg in the first week of December 1941 it was as if a gigantic hunting-net had dropped from the sky, trapping people where they stood, and preventing those parted from loved ones from reaching them. Where they were when the net fell was due to chance, but its effects would, in many cases, be felt for the rest of their lives. So many of the children in this story, who have been scarred by what happened in camp, could have avoided the whole experience – had Fate been on their side. One fifteen-year-old girl fled Shanghai and the impending war in December 1941 together with her mother and younger brother and sister. They left their father behind and headed for the safety of Australia. Their ship put in at Manila on the very morning the Japanese attacked. When the Japanese overran the city they were taken to an internment camp where they remained for four years, separated into three units. The girl went to the women's section, her brother to the men's and her mother and sister to a different location. They were not reunited with their father until 1950. If they had left Shanghai a day earlier they would have remained free.

A fifteen-year-old boy who lived with his parents in Canton returned to his boarding school in Hong Kong for the autumn term of 1941 looking forward to the cricket season. On 8 December the Japanese attacked the airport, a few miles from his school. After finding himself caught up in the bloody battle for Hong Kong, dodging bombs and shells and running messages for the British services, he was sent to a prison camp, alone, the following month. A year later, when food rations had been cut and conditions were very harsh, he heard that his parents had been safely repatriated back to Britain. He did not see his relatives again until the autumn of 1945. If he had delayed his return to school,

he would have spent the war in Britain with his family.

A university professor working as a missionary in West China made the long journey to Hong Kong to meet his wife and three young children who were returning from a trip visiting relatives in Canada. Their pleasure at being reunited was short-lived. Within a matter of hours Japanese planes began bombing the colony. Caught up in the battle they spent weeks living rough in bombed-out houses, foraging for food, before they too were interned. He had to watch helplessly as his children got thinner and weaker, until his once sparky and mischievous elder daughter lay listlessly on her bed all day. If that ship had docked two days earlier the whole family would have avoided the war altogether as West China was outside the war zone.

The situation was worst for missionary families who had sent their young children to what was regarded as the best school east of Suez in Chefoo, in the far north of China. It was the tradition to send children to this school from the age of seven. Because of the huge distances involved – one little girl travelled 3,000 miles – the parents only visited once a year, leaving the children to board year-long.

When the Japanese marched into the school on the morning of 8 December, in a display of violence which terrified the children, barging into classrooms, taking away the head of the school and punching elderly female teachers, the parents were thousands of miles away. These children were eventually interned, with their teachers, in Weihsien camp. There, like children in other camps, they endured hunger, cold, inadequate clothing and, for the girls, the embarrassment of having to sew – and wash – their sanitary towels. The teachers did their best. But spinster teachers in the formal 1940s were no substitute for parents. Unlike other interned children, they had to endure it all without the protective hugs, reassurance and encouragement that children take for granted when they are part of a family. For many in this group it would be five years before they were reunited with their families again.

In one of the saddest cases a girl of nine found herself orphaned in camp. She had already suffered a major shock when the

kempeitai, the Japanese version of the Gestapo, burst into her family home in the small hours and took away her father. Her mother later died in camp, leaving her to fend for herself for the rest of the war.

The camps ran into hundreds – there were nineteen in Shanghai alone – and were scattered over a huge area ranging from Weihsien in the north of China down to Java and Sumatra in the former Netherlands East Indies, now Indonesia, and including Burma, Thailand (then Siam), Malaya, Borneo, the Philippines and Japan itself. In many camps as many as a third of the prisoners were children. The women's section of Changi jail in Singapore held 1,000 women and 330 children, Stanley camp in Hong Kong held 2,500 adults and 300 children. Santo Tomas camp in the Philippines 3,200 adults and 400 children and Lunghwa camp in Shanghai 1,700 adults and 300 children. On islands such as Java and Sumatra there were more than 40,000 prisoners of which 1,500 were British.

The Japanese, whose military strategy was so ruthlessly preplanned, had no plan for accommodating prisoners. Their own martial code forbade surrender and the sheer numbers of Allied prisoners took them by surprise. There was no organisation with overall responsibility for their care and the administration of the camps varied according to geography. Many were run by Japanese civilians – this was the case with all the camps in China. The commandants were often diplomats and were, on the whole, decent men who did their best for the prisoners. Camps in the Netherlands East Indies were run by the military. Other camps, such as those in Manila, Singapore and Hong Kong, oscillated between civilian and military regimes. Takeover by the military invariably led to a decrease in rations and an increase in punishments and beatings.

Prisoners on the islands that had formed the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) endured far worse conditions and treatment than any other group, and children shared their suffering. This applied to military and civilian prisoners alike. One fifteen-year-old girl was locked up in a prison cell on Java with her mother and

thirty-three other people, nine of whom were children. One group consisted of five children: the eldest was a little boy of eight. As his mother was ill in hospital (she later died), the eight-year-old had to look after his three younger brothers and his two-year-old sister. The lavatory was a stinking fly-infested hole in the corner, the cell's earth floor was running with water and their diet was one spoonful of boiled rice three times a day. After three and a half months, sixteen of the original thirty-three were dead and one woman had gone mad.[1]

Everything that happened in other camps was magnified in the Netherlands East Indies. The appalling way civilian internees were treated mirrored that of military POWs interned on these islands, where men died in their hundreds. Many things were different in these camps. Families were separated and not allowed any written contact. The men were held in different camps from the women, and as soon as they reached the age of twelve, and sometimes sooner, the boys were classed as men, torn from the arms of their weeping mothers and sent to men's camps to work. Whereas in almost all the camps elsewhere in the east the adults were allowed to set up some form of education for the children, in most of the NEI camps it was banned. This was an essential, and in some camps explicitly stated, first step in the zealous crusade to destroy European colonial culture. Books, paper, writing materials, money and photographs were also banned. People found in possession of any of these items were beaten. Food rations were so inadequate that the children ate snakes, snails and roots. One of the most haunting images of internment in this region is of little girls so lacking in energy that they sit pretend-playing with their hands because they haven't the energy to run about. Whereas in many of the camps in China doctors had been free to take a basic supply of drugs into the camps with them, there were few medical supplies in the Netherlands East Indies. This led to the dreadful phenomenon of life-saving operations being performed without anaesthetic.

Some of the effects on children of experiencing and witnessing so much suffering are predictable and visible. A great many

former internees took a long time to return to full physical health after the war. Adjusting to normal eating and returning to healthy body weights was straightforward enough. Many, however, after being repatriated to Britain, were endlessly ill with coughs and chills, a syndrome the Victorians would have understood as 'failure to thrive' and we would probably attribute to a damaged immune system. Those who contracted malaria went on suffering attacks for as long as ten years after their release. The lack of calcium in the camps wreaked its effect on teeth, bones and growth. Many former child internees lost all their teeth young and those diagnosed with osteoporosis later in life attribute it to a lack of calcium in the vital growing years. A particularly cruel effect of malnutrition in childhood is the impact it has on future fertility. A high number of girls who were interned shortly before they reached puberty have not had children.

The experience of internment also had other more insidious effects that, in some cases, continued to make themselves felt for years after the war was over. The harsh regime in camp, which for some had included torture, the difficulty of coming to terms with having lost everything, the struggle to start afresh in a demoralised inward-looking society all took their toll. For many, internment quite simply destroyed family life, which was never the same again. One of the saddest things was the premature death of so many of the fathers. These deaths not only left sons and daughters mourning a parent, but also bequeathed them the burden of the dependent widow. One girl who wanted to get married was required by her mother to remain living at home for three years after her father's death 'to keep her company'. In many cases the children undertook a lifelong financial commitment to their widowed mothers.

The most poignant victims are the boys and girls who were separated from their parents. In those vital, vulnerable years, when children are groping their way towards the kind of people they want to become and have such need of loving role models, they were on their own. Many have struggled all their lives to overcome the effects of this, suffering from depression and

breakdowns. There have even been suicides. As for family life, the longed-for return home after such a long separation was often stormy. Mothers could be savagely critical of these children they hardly recognised – their anger perhaps a mask for their own guilt at not having been there. And many children were angry, too, feeling that their parents had abandoned them.

But it wasn't anybody's fault. You were where you were when the net fell. More than anything the story of the children who lost their childhood is that of a group of people who found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.