OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 28

Some Childhood Memories of Japanese-occupied Hong Kong

In the Ching family we were seven; parents, myself, three older sisters and a younger brother. The Japanese invaded Hong Kong shortly after my eighth birthday and remained in occupation until a few months before my 12th. We grew up quickly in those years, and emerged the better for the absence of the amah-dominated spoilt upbringing that we would otherwise have had. All but one of our four amahs left when the fighting began, returning to their homes in China, and she stayed on without pay, sharing our family meals with us.

War preparations included black-out drills when my brother and I would roam our darkened home in Happy Valley with torches. When the war started it seemed to us at first to be just an extension of those fun black-out drills. We soon learned differently. The climax came with the battle at Wong Nei Chong Gap at the head of the Valley. Japanese shells from Kowloon in the north, and North Point in the east, fell short and the terrace of flats in which we lived in Village Road had two corners demolished while we sheltered, terrified, on the ground floor.

The terrace of flats at, from left to right, Nos 5, 7 & 9 Village Road

Japanese street patrol (from Cheng Po Hung's ***Hong Kong during the Japanese Occupation****)*

What I most remember about the Japanese occupation is not the hunger. While grit-filled rice with sweet potato leaves, however inadequate, were eaten ravenously hunger was something we lived with and gave no conscious thought to. We did not pine for the milk, eggs, meat and fruit that we never saw. We were more concerned with the plague of fleas which bit incessantly.

What we were all very conscious of was fear – of the Japanese, of the *laan tsai*, and of the bombing raids. The Japanese instilled fear; physical violence and bullying were a matter of course. An incident, recorded in my father's diary, reflected this. A man entered a Japanese office, ignoring a bowl of water at the front entrance – an unfamiliar innovation. He was called back and slapped about for not washing his hands first. When he emerged, keen to co-operate, he hurriedly washed his hands. He was again slapped, for implying that the office was unclean. In their eyes people did nothing right, and it was best to keep away from them. No sensible victim of a crime would report it to the police; that was asking for trouble.

My father and I weekly walked to Central to buy what little food we could afford because it was cheaper there than in the Happy Valley market. We chose our route carefully; to avoid the Naval Hospital sentry we used Wanchai Road. A sentry at the junction of Wanchai Road and Johnston Road we bowed to but otherwise ignored, as he stood unmoving in a large pillbox. But those outside Victoria, Wellington and Murray Barracks required strategic crossings of the road to keep well away from them. On one occasion, hurrying home in the rain, a loud "Kurrah!" stopped us – we had missed a soldier sheltering in a doorway and had failed to bow. We were made to stand in the rain for some time before being released. My fear then was that my father might lose his temper and make matters worse.

But perhaps the greatest fear experienced was in the pre-dawn visit of the kempetai who came to take my father away in 1943. Oddly, there were only two Japanese officers accompanied by a number of armed plain-clothed Chinese. He was released after two months in the gendarmerie located in the Le Calvaire Convent in Happy Valley, where Sir Vandeleur Grayburn was briefly a cell-mate; he was in poor health on release and was admitted to the Nethersole Hospital.

My father had a long-wave radio which was permitted by the Japanese. Unknown to them, he also had an adaptor, about the size of a shoe box, which connected to the radio and enabled short-wave reception. This he hid in a hole he dug into the wall, behind the old-fashioned foot-high timber dado that ran around the bottom of all the interior walls. When he was arrested, my mother had a relative remove and destroy the adaptor, for fear of a house search by the kempetai. My father was more than somewhat annoyed on release to discover that he no longer had a source of world news.

In Occasional Paper No. 10 Bea Hutcheon tells the story of the day, in Macau, a boy snatched her bag of pastries. I had a similar experience. For being a "good boy" my father bought me two small cakes. I stood outside the China Building eating one while clutching a paper bag holding the other, when a man snatched the bag and put the cake in his mouth. He did not run. We just stood looking at each other, both busily eating my precious cakes.

A few windows in our home had iron bars and could be left open, but those without bars had wooden typhoon shutters which we closed and bolted securely at night. At twilight time we would lock up and then sit in the suffocating gloom telling each other stories. There was, more often than not, no electricity and even when available it was too expensive to use. My father learned how to by-pass the meter by inserting a simple U-shaped piece of heavy wire into it. We did this to cook on the electric stove, but it was considered too risky to do it just for lighting.

We all slept in the one large room; my father held the view that if a bomb fell on us it would be best that we all met with the same fate. On a moon-lit night we would lie awake, fully clothed, expecting an air raid. The drone of an engine would prompt someone to suggest "a truck". As the noise increased someone would shout "planes". We would jump out of bed and run to what was considered the safest place under some stairs. The engine noises would grow louder, there would be the sound of explosions and sometimes the building would shake. Then we would hear the air-raid alert and the firing of ack-ack guns, followed by silence and we would crawl back to bed for a sleepless night. The all-clear siren gave little reassurance.

In air-raids during the day bombers which descended on their targets were a joy to watch from a safe distance. But more often the bombers would float majestically high in the sky. It seemed to us they had no chance from that height of hitting their targets. An airman who took part in those raids told us after the war that their target was quite simply "Hong Kong". Whether that was true, I do not know. But we were terrified of those raids, and we hated them for apparently indiscriminately causing death and destruction. To be caught in the open in an air-raid was even more terrifying. People would run in all directions. But there was a kind of logic behind it. You could not stop the bomb falling, but you could try not to be where it would fall if it were to hit you. So the answer was to run, and keep running, to be somewhere else.

The raids gave me personal satisfaction by adding to my collection of shrapnel. I would go searching for those nasty bits of metal. One day I picked up an unexploded shell, about six inches long and an inch in diameter, and proudly placed it in the centre of the dining-room table. My father's words on seeing it shall remain unreported. As I slowly climbed on his instructions into the open nullah that ran past our home, to deposit the shell in the running water at the bottom, it occurred to me that he would not have made me do it if there was any risk of an explosion – at least, I liked to think so.

We did not go to school, but my father taught us every morning. So we had plenty of time to amuse ourselves when not helping with the vegetable garden on the roof or carrying out other household chores. A great advantage was the almost complete absence of traffic on the roads, so that the streets in Happy Valley became our playground.

It was strangely sad in October, 1945 after nearly four years' holiday from school, to embark from Holts Wharf on the escort carrier *HMS Arbiter* for the journey to Sydney that marked the end of our war experience.

HMS Arbiter in Sydney Harbour

My father wrote of the Japanese in occupied Hong Kong: *The Japanese may charitably be called childish in their spite and cruelty; but to term them sub-human is no injustice. They retained a thin veneer of courtesy – sometimes; but beneath it they were arrogant, contemptuous, vindictive and cruel.* An exception to this generalisation was the Lutheran minister Reverend Kiyoshi Watanabe, an interpreter with the Japanese Army who risked his life to give help to the POWs and internees in Hong Kong. Sadly, his wife and daughter lost their lives in Hiroshima in 1945.