



IN JAPANESE CAPTIVITY

STORY OF A TEENAGER IN WARTIME JAVA

by

Vera Radó ©

It's August 1995, and I am sufficiently far removed from the traumas I suffered as a teenage prisoner of the Japanese more than fifty years ago to tell about my experiences.

The process of rehabilitation and healing I went through can be visualised as a very long, stony, winding, uphill path, full of obstacles over which I kept tripping, stumbling and falling, only to scramble up and limp on – at times too depressed and despairing to want to continue. But at times also buoyed up by an understanding, caring remark.

I have made that weary journey, and I have reached the top, and, although nothing will ever erase the memories, deeply etched as they are within me - within all of us who were part of it – I can now walk reasonably erect and even with a measure of stability. Pain and distress will never fail to strike me again and again at recalling this period of my life, but the all-consuming terror, the continual feeling of crisis, the anxiety, have left me. I am in calmer waters now and almost daily find myself thanking that universal force of which I am a tiny fraction for steering me safely through the tempests of my earlier life.

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When the Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941 I was fifteen years old and lived with my family, consisting of my mother, father and brother Ivan, in Surabaya on the island of Java, in the former Dutch East Indies – now Indonesia. Surabaya was the Dutch naval base, and consequently, became a target for Japanese air raids. They started in early February 1942, and the first one, aimed directly at the heart of the city, caused many deaths and a lot of damage.

By this time there were air raid shelters built in most private backyards and also in public places, and soon, with sirens wailing often twice a day, we were spending more time in the shelters than anywhere else. It was an anxious time, spent listening to the hum of the bombers, the whistle and thud of falling bombs, and wondering whether we were going to survive yet another day. School was suspended, and soon all outdoor activity, such as swimming, playing tennis, etc. ceased.

Halfway through February came the shocking news that Singapore had fallen, and my mother urged my father to pack up and leave. But he could not be persuaded. Broadcasts remained optimistic – to boost morale – even when the Japanese marched through Sumatra, beating back every resistance, and then landed on the shores of Java. By then it was too late to flee. Within a matter of days the Japanese Imperial Army came marching into Surabaya.

It was a black day, that 8th of March 1942, in more than one sense. The oil tanks on the southwestern edge of the city, were being blown up by the Dutch to prevent the precious fuel from falling into enemy hands. From early morning there was a huge pall of smoke hanging over the city, and against this ominous backdrop we watched the occupying army's progress through our street. First we saw tanks with the red-on-white flags flying, then trucks and armoured cars, then masses of soldiers on foot and on bicycles. They looked triumphant, but we were trembling with apprehension at what was in store for us, whilst peeking through the louvres of our locked front door.

Immediately after the occupation we had to register at the Town Hall and obtain identity cards, which we had to carry on us all the time and show on demand. Whenever we met Japanese military personnel in the street, we had to stop and bow deeply. If we were on our bikes, we had to step off, and bow - or risk having our bikes confiscated. Cars, including doctors', were requisitioned, radios had to be handed in to be sealed, so that only the local stations could be received. Very soon all public servants were rounded up and imprisoned – from the Governor General down to the most junior clerk. This included all male teachers. So school ceased altogether.

Some school buildings were used as POW camps, and some continued with native teachers teaching native children. Whenever I passed my old school I could hear the kids singing "Asia Raya", the song of Free Asia, and there were posters everywhere proclaiming "Asia for the Asians". The Japanese were out to extinguish all European influence in Asia, and establish their own 'Greater South East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' with Japan as supreme leader. It was part of their ideal to establish Japan as the dominant power in our part of the world and to eradicate all white colonialism. To be replaced by Japanese colonialism, one presumes!

A women's camp was set up in one of the suburbs of Surabaya, called the "Darmo Camp". It held about 6000 women, whose husbands had been interned, and their children. The gates finally closed on them in January 1943. My father, along with a small number of other Europeans who worked in essential industries and services, was still needed, so we were still free. The Japanese had no army doctors with them, so they imposed on my father and about a dozen other physicians at all times of the day, mostly to treat them for venereal diseases. However, as the last of the white population was clapped into prison, our turn came too.

Doomsday arrived on 31st August 1943, the Dutch queen's birthday. My brother and I had to go to Council Chambers in the morning on official business, and when we returned at lunchtime, my father had already been taken away by Japanese soldiers. They had ordered my mother to pack for herself and us and be ready to be interned in a couple of hours. The time lapse had given my Mum a spell to figure out what to pack, and to this day I have to praise her for her presence of mind. I watched her as she pulled out the bottom drawer of her dressing table, and upended it into her suitcase. It was full of patent medicines. By this act of foresight she saved my life – and that of a few others.

Presently, the Japanese returned, and we were taken by 'dokkar' (horse-drawn carriage) to Werfstraat Jail, a regular jail for criminals, murderers, thieves and what-have-you, which also served to house political prisoners. At the gate we had to say goodbye to Ivan, who was led away to the men's section. We joined a queue of women and children, amongst whom we recognised friends and acquaintances. We were registered, stripped of money and jewellery, and led away in small groups.

The compound to which we were taken was surrounded by high stone walls topped with broken glass. There were six large cells with barred doors and big copper padlocks. Each cell was meant for ten to twelve persons, but we were pushed into them with about forty women and children. At the back of the cell was a hole in one corner for a squat-toilet, and there were mats on the stone floor for us to sleep on. At 6 p.m. the doors were

banged shut, and with the sharp click of the key in the padlock we were left in no doubt as to our status. We were prisoners of the Japanese. For how long?

None of us slept much that night on the cold stone floor. The noise of children crying and mothers shouting and wailing was like something out of a nightmare. The mothers were deeply traumatised, and the children inconsolable. All they wanted was to “go-o-o h-o-o-me”!! There was no privacy at all, so, when someone had to use the toilet, we stood with two or three together as a shield in front of her. The single toilet soon became a source of continuing stench. In the morning we were let out for a bath in a nearby block, and it was a relief to be able to move around and get away from the ruckus. We were mixed in with Iraqi women and children, whose standards of hygiene were not quite the same as ours. After a week, at our request, our group of about one hundred European women and children was moved to another part of the jail. It had a more pleasant aspect – for a jail, that is. It even boasted a few trees. There were two rows of ten one-person cells, separated by a cyclone fence with open gate, two bathrooms in a separate block opposite the cells, and the whole of it was enclosed by high walls of rough woven bamboo reinforced by barbed wire. We called it “The Paradise”.

At this stage of our prison life we had enough to eat. The food was cooked in the prison kitchen and was meant for mainly native prisoners. There was an unchanging menu of boiled rice, vegetable soup, tofu, a bit of chilli paste and occasionally a banana for each. The vegetables were never cleaned; they were just thrown into the pot roots and all, and the bottom of the food drum always contained a layer of sand, bits of string, wire, and – sometimes – a cockroach or other unidentifiable bit of protein.

The most distressing part of our jail existence was the witnessing of the torture of political prisoners, sometimes by sight, but mostly by sound. Opposite our enclosure was a row of small cells. Men were taken daily from there to another part of the jail back of our compound. We could clearly hear the bellowing of the Japanese and the men’s terrible screams. One man kept shouting for his mother. After the interrogation, having been beaten unconscious, the men were taken away on a stretcher and thrown back into their cells. We could not escape this horror. It went on incessantly and relentlessly.

Once, we saw above the top of our wall, a man being tortured on the upper gallery of the administration building opposite. This poor unfortunate had his wrists tied behind his back, and had been hoisted up by his hands until he stood on tiptoe. A Japanese soldier was barking at him, stabbing him repeatedly with a burning cigarette. I quickly turned away my eyes, but the picture will always remain with me. At another time, a woman, who had been locked up in a dark cell in solitary confinement for some weeks, was released into our section, and promptly committed suicide by hanging herself in her cell. It was left to her young son to cut her loose. These events unnerved us all.

In March 1944 we were ordered to pack, loaded onto a long train the following morning and moved to the other end of Java, to a small town called Tangerang, 20 km west of Batavia (Jakarta). The train journey, which normally would have taken twelve hours, took three days in a train with all windows and doors locked and all blinds down, and with no provision for food or water.

On the second day, at our urgent request, as all of us, but especially the children, were limp with thirst, we stopped for water from a railway siding pump (for filling up the steam trains), and promptly got the runs. Our carriage was packed with bodies; we sat on the floors and in the aisles. The seats were for the elderly. The single toilet soon overflowed, and thereafter became a disaster area, defying all description.

On the third night we arrived at a dismal-looking dimly lit station, and had to walk for almost an hour to our destination. The smaller children had to be carried, as they were too exhausted to walk. We finally reached a large building behind a massive bamboo-and-wire fence with four watchtowers on each corner. Although there was some food ready for us to eat, all most of us were capable of doing was to find a place to stretch out and sleep. I have never slept so soundly on a hard wooden board!

We found out later that our new 'home' was a former corrective institution for delinquent youths. We also discovered that we had been travelling with about 1500 other women and children from the "Darmo" Camp in Surabaya plus the contingent of about 100 Iraqi women and children from whom we had been separated earlier in Werfstraat Jail.

Tangerang Camp consisted of large wards built around two courtyards with a central kitchen, flanked by four rows of single cells (meant for the worst offenders?). The wards had wooden boards two metres wide, running along both sides in two tiers, one at a height of one metre, the other above that at about two metres from the floor, with a ladder in each corner to climb to the 'top floor'. My mother and I found room at the top; the climb up the ladder was definitely worth the airier aspect of the upper storey.

Here we lived for a year on hard work and diminishing food rations. Our daily meal consisted of one ladleful of glutinous sago porridge in the morning and a 5 cm wide piece of bread, made of unleavened cornflour. Half of this piece was meant for our evening meal. At midday we received one cup of boiled rice and one scoop of watery vegetables, in which our 'meat' ration was also cooked. With a bit of luck, we at times found one or two small cubes of meat – mostly tripe – floating in the brew on our individual plates. The Japanese got incensed if we complained about the small rations, and told us we should be grateful for what we got, as food was in short supply. They themselves looked well-fed.

Soon, every second person contracted malaria, and all of us had at least one bout of dysentery. I got both diseases, but – thanks to my mother's foresight in packing quinine – at least the malaria could be controlled. The dysentery kept recurring all through my imprisonment, and to this day I am suffering from the damage to my digestive system. My mother had an extremely painful episode of kidney stone, for which there was no painkiller strong enough in her medicine kit. Fortunately, she passed the stone after a few days, and was put on light kitchen duties, cleaning the vegetables grown by our "garden team", of which I was a part.

The worst experiences in this camp were the periodic visits by the supreme commander over all camps in Western Java, Captain Sonei. This individual was a lunatic – in the true sense of the word. He was reputed to go out of his mind at full moon. We were notified of his visits the day before, and ordered to have everything looking neat and tidy.

On the day, we had to line up on the tenko field, where daily roll call was held. As Sonei entered with his interpreter, we received a command “Kiutske!” (stand at attention), while he climbed the dais. At the command “Kèrèh!” we bowed deeply to acknowledge his supremacy over us, miserable wretches, then came “Norèh!” (at ease), after which he would shout, rant and rave at us for about an hour, pausing at times for the interpreter to translate in Malay. His speech was always the same – we owed deep gratitude to his divine emperor’s great bounty in providing us with food and a roof over our heads. Any complaints or breaches of the rules would be severely punished.

Then came the moment we were all dreading. Sonei would pause, sweep us with a malevolent glare, and pick out someone at random from our ranks, gesturing for the woman to come forward and stand in front of him. This poor, defenceless victim would then be beaten senseless with open hands and fists, until she fell to the ground, when she was given a few hefty kicks with his boots. “And this,” Sonei would say with a nasty smirk, pointing to the bleeding body at his feet, “is your example. This is what happens to those who disobey the rules.”

One of his victims died of internal injuries. Sonei was tried by the Dutch for war crimes and hanged. He professed not to understand why he received such harsh punishment, since he was only doing his duty by his emperor.

One year after our arrival at Tangerang, we were put on transport again, this time to Camp Adek in Batavia, where we joined about 4500 other women and children from that region. Although this concentration camp was larger than Tangerang, room was at a premium. We were packed into the wards like sardines; each individual got 55 cm of space. By this time we had all been whittled down in size with poor nutrition and sickness, but 55 cm is a tiny space for living, sleeping and eating. There was, of course, never a lack of border disputes – sometimes very loud ones. Tempers were easily aroused, as everyone was under stress, hungry and irritable. Women who were responsible for small children, in particular, were under almost unbearable pressure to keep themselves and their offspring alive.

Rumours kept flying around of great successes by the Allies and of impending liberation, but nobody had a radio. The regular house searches had seen to that, so we did not know what was really happening. In fact, we were completely cut off and isolated from the outside world. The rumours actually kept us going, because by this time – mid-1945 – we were nearing the end of our endurance. Many of the very old and the very young had died, and even young girls of my age group were getting ill and dying with increasing frequency.

There was a small team of women in our camp, detailed to build coffins – made of woven and split bamboo – for burying the dead, and they were kept increasingly busy. By this time the death rate had risen to four to five persons per day. Most of us had lapsed into a state of apathy, consistent with long-term starvation. I myself, found that I no longer very much cared whether I was going to die in this wretched camp or be liberated. We were all dreaming of food. It became a major preoccupation with many, even an obsession, resulting in the incessant exchange of recipes for one or the other divine dish.

We were also beginning to disbelieve the rumours of Allied victories. So far they had been proven false. Maybe the Japanese were winning, and maybe we would all soon be dead. I certainly felt that I would not last another six months. At nineteen, I was minus energy, suffering from chronic diarrhoea, the beginning of beri-beri, and incapable of any great physical effort, such as digging gardens and growing vegetables, which had been my previous task. I was given permission to resign and rest in the garden under trees, adjacent to the tenko field.

Then, suddenly, in mid-August, we were getting more food – an extra leg of beef, more vegetables from the markets, even a small fish each. Oh, the smell of it! We couldn't believe it at first, then started to suspect that something important had happened. It was not until mid-September 1945 that we received orders to assemble at the tenko field, and told that the war was over. Just that, no explanation, no further information, except that we were also told we could leave the camp 'at our own risk'. We soon found out why. Two women who left for their home in the city, were ambushed by rioting young Indonesians and murdered.

It's a miracle we survived – not only the years of imprisonment but the aftermath of the Japanese occupation. There was a full-scale revolution going on in Java, where the Japanese had for years brain-washed the younger generations of Indonesians to throw off the colonial yoke. The rampaging Indonesian youths (pemudas) imprisoned the Japanese, whom they had come to view as detested occupiers, then turned on us, hated colonials. They murdered a sizable number of former civilian prisoners, including women and children, before the British troops finally landed in Java and evacuated us to Singapore. Not too many people know about our plight during this political vacuum, yet it is part of World War II history.

My mother and I were eventually reunited with my father and Ivan in Surabaya. By then the city had become a cauldron of seething fanaticism and hatred. We barely escaped being attacked and butchered as we were taken to the harbour in a convoy of trucks with a Ghurka⁸ soldier positioned on the roof of each one, machine-gun ready. We travelled between thick rows of angry natives, hissing at us and looking very threatening. It was a great relief to embark on a British landing craft and watch Surabaya disappear in the distance.

We had been totally at the mercy of the Japanese occupiers, then again at the mercy of the rioting Indonesians. It was a wonderful relief to arrive in Singapore, even though we landed in another camp. But this was very different. We were free, we were well-fed, and – above all – we were safe!

We learnt later that the atomic bomb had ended the war. It killed many Japanese civilians, men, women and children, but it also saved hundreds of thousands of lives of prisoners of the Japanese, like us. Violence, death and destruction are inevitable in wars, but we have to take a balanced view, because all sides suffer casualties. In the end, nobody wins.

JAVA 1920s

*I remember sunny lawns
fragrant blooms
leafy shrubs
shady trees, a dark
green pond inhabited
by phantom carp.
Two ferocious pups
shaking to death
a big black python
in the driveway.*

*Rice paddies, canefields
marching towards
haze-wrapped mountains,
hugging bamboo-ringed
villages.*

*The rhythmic throb of
wooden tong-tongs
underscoring night calls
of geckoes.*

*Our warm lamplit home
under cool brilliance of
tropical stars.*

*In these memories
my happy childhood lives*

*Vera Radó
20/10/99*

INTERNEE
(Java 31/8/43)

*The moon slants a pattern
of prison bars on wall and floor;
I'm like an animal caged
my soul stripped of light and song
my youthful innocence
my trust in human decency
forever lost.*

*Was it only yesterday?
Only one day ago
that the enemy seized us
invaded our home
shattered our treasures
our memories
ripped out our roots?*

*Until yesterday I lived
a life of sun and laughter
a carefree sheltered life
a haven from the violence of war
I knew it couldn't last
it had to end one day.*

*It ended yesterday
abruptly -
In one brief day
my world entirely overturned
I ceased to be a child.*

*Vera Radó
11/5/94*

VOICES

Surabaya, Java 31 August 1943

Children's voices

plaintive, tearful, shrill

Throughout that first night in jail;

Non-comprehending, pleading attention

seeking comfort

from traumatised adults.

Mothers' voices

instinctively soothing

becoming irascible in despair

No words can console the children

Darkness only amplifies their anguish

their wails end in sobs.

Fear is irrational

A jail with iron doors

bars and padlocks

A scene of terror for little ones.

Children's voices

crying in unrelieved misery

in desolation, hunger, pain

At length stilled – by exhaustion

depletion... death.....

Through these voices

echoing forever along

the corridors of time

Human suffering is recorded.

Is anyone listening?

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