

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF WAR

By Ruby Tsao❖

US involvement of War with Japan started with Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. But China's involvement with Japan had a much longer history. The Japanese invasion of China began in earnest in the 19th Century. Japan started occupation of parts of China, Taiwan and other smaller islands including Diaoyu Islands in 1895. In the 20th Century, the incident on September 18, 1931 was the start of full scale Japanese invasion in China. War intensified with Japanese bombing of Lugou Bridge near Beijing on July 7, 1937.

War activities all over China lasted 14 years until 1945 resulting in millions of deaths of civilians and destruction caused by numerous bombings in cities all over China. Towards the end of World War II, 2 US atomic bombs dropped on Japan forced the surrender of Japan in 1945. International leaders gathered in Potsdam to lay down post war world order. Potsdam Declaration spelled out the conditions of Japan's surrender for it to give up territories gained through acts of aggression. US involvement in World War II lasted 4 years from 1941 to 1945. Sure, the US suffered military casualties. Except for a brief period in Hawaii, war was not fought on American soil. The US mainland did not suffer prolonged destruction and civilian deaths like the 14 years of Japanese atrocities in China.

This was the background of the times of my childhood in China. My father, General Lo❖, was a military officer in the Nationalist government. During the War years, my family had to move from place to place to follow the military movements—big cities and rural villages in Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, Guangdong. In big cities, air raid sirens and running to shelters were daily events in my memory. In Yichang, our house was shattered when we got home from the air raid shelter. There was a hole in the ceiling. Glasses were broken all over the place.

Once I almost died in the air raid shelter when I was barely three years old. My mother was holding



my younger brother Hank in her arms. I still remember his baby shoe at my eye level. While waiting in the shelter, a bomb exploded nearby blocking the entrance. We were shaken and fell into the water in the center. My mother thought I was dead because I felt cold and limp. Rescuers came by and asked how many people were inside. There were 17 people, but the rescuer heard only “one”. He left to check on other shelters with more people. Afterwards, a friend saw that we didn't go home. He came to look for us and sent for people to dig us out.

In small villages, we lived the lives of farm kids. We learned how to catch shrimp or minnows in creeks with bamboo baskets. We went barefoot to search for water chestnuts in rice paddies. I memorized the location of a date tree — something for a child to look forward to when the fruits became ripe. We had no toys, but we had fun folding pieces of paper into boats, birds and other things. I enjoyed my childhood because I did not know anything different. We had no trouble resisting the temptation of chocolate because there wasn't any. No will power was needed to go on a diet because it was built-in for us. Years later, I realized that it was a good thing. As an adult, I don't need as much dieting because I had a head start as a child.

When we lived in farm houses, water did not come out of faucets. Rainwater was collected from

the house roofs into barrels placed under the four corners. That was all the water supply for all the drinking, cooking and washing needs of the whole family. Depending on the weather and the season, rain was not always available when we needed it. On some things, we were saving for a “rainy day”; on use of water, we were saving for “sunny days”. It was so precious that we used the same bucket of water in this order: drinking and cooking— brushing teeth— washing face—washing hands— washing feet— mopping floor— and finally, watering plants. Not a drop was wasted. Now that was real “conservation”!

With so much destruction all over China during the War, all materials were in shortage. Education was an important part of a child’s life in China even in war times. In spite of constant moving, we managed to go to schools whenever and wherever possible— sometimes in temples, next to coffins. Between bombing raids, we did not neglect to get

homework done. Because paper was in shortage, I first wrote a draft with pencil; then used ink to go over it on the same paper for presentation to the teacher. We were way ahead of times in our lifestyle. We practiced “conservation” before we ever heard of such a word. We lived the life of three R’s (reduce, reuse, recycle) before it became fashionable.

My father came from a Hakka❖ village in the county of Dapu❖ in Guangdong❖. One characteristic of Hakka people is a strong bond with hometown folks. We called everybody uncle, auntie, brother or sister depending on the age. When hometown folks came to the city to look for a job, they would come to our house and stay with us. My brother Hank, 2 years younger than I, would often find a stranger in his bed in the morning. “Who are you?” “I am your uncle”. We found many new uncles this way.

Hakka people are also thrifty. Whatever money we saved up became worthless during the super-inflation after the War. With the surrender of Japan, my family moved from Chongqing to Guangzhou. I still remember vividly that once my mother sent me to the market to buy something. I checked with three stores. The price at the first one was \$200; second one \$300. By the time I reached the third store, the price was \$400. So I hurried back to the first store and by that time, the price had changed to \$600. That was 300% inflation in 20 minutes.

In Guangzhou, I was enrolled in a fifth grade class in a missionary school where students started to learn English in the third grade. With constant moving from place to place, frequently dodging bombs in air raid shelters, my education was spotty to say the least. I faced difficulties in my class because I had not learned the alphabets yet. On top of that, teachers spoke Cantonese in the class, a dialect I did not understand. Fortunately, there was a page of alphabets on the front of the textbook. I learned the alphabets by singing the alphabet song to identify the letters in the sentences. The boys in the front row laughed at my low scores when the teacher handed out the papers. But by the second semester, my scores were higher than those boys. To this day, I don’t know how to “print” some alphabets because I started with cursive writing.

This peaceful period did not last long. With so

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The sudden influx of mainland refugees increased the population of Taiwan by about 15%. This displaced group of people lost everything in the War. We barely got on a boat to get to Taiwan. Naturally there were frantic efforts for adults to scramble for housing, for jobs and for children to enroll in schools. I fought a whole day among the crowds to

apply for entrance to Taipei First Girls High School, the only school I had an application in. Luckily, I passed the entrance examination. If I didn't pass, I would have had no school to go to.

After two years, with the imminent Communist invasion of Taiwan, my family moved to the rural area to live among Hakka people in Taiwan. Every morning at 5 AM, I walked in the dark to the train station to catch a train to attend Hsin Chu High School. I was there for the first semester of senior high school. When the danger of war subsided, my family moved back to Taipei. This time I applied for entrance to two schools—Taipei First Girls High School and National Taiwan Normal University High School. I was accepted in both schools. I chose to go to Taipei First Girls High School again. There I met many life-long friends. Upon graduation, I was able to enter National Taiwan University to finish my schooling before coming to the US for graduate school.

I am writing down my eye-witness account in the War with Japan so younger generations do not forget. Otherwise our first hand experience will be lost with the passing of our generation. Japan still has not admitted the war crimes 68 years after World War II. It's not ready to give up territories gained through acts of aggression, including Diaoyu Islands. Right-wing militarism is again rearing its ugly head stirring up trouble in Asia. We should reflect if US should be on the side of injustice aiding Japan in its aggressive efforts. Remember Pearl Harbor! Will Japan easily forget the suffering of 2 atomic bombs dropped by the US?

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Ruby Tsao, born in China, went to Taiwan with family in 1949; received BA from National Taiwan University; awarded full scholarship from an international education foundation to study in the US, received MS from the University of Michigan; worked in libraries before switching to investments after 4 children arrived. In 70's and 80's, she contributed to family finance from real estate through "depreciation" and "appreciation". She has served as President of General Resource Technology, Inc. and treasurer of Tsao Foundation -both organizations to promote utilization and research of renewable resources technology developed by her husband Professor George Tsao.

