

CELEBRATING WEIHSIEN'S LIBERATION

August 15 – 18, 2005

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On August 17, 2005, the city of Weifang (formerly Weih sien), in Shandong Province, China, celebrated the 60th anniversary of the liberation by U.S. paratroopers of the Japanese concentration camp located there from 1943 to 1945. The "enemy nationals" interned there had included my grandparents, George and Gertrude Wilder, who had been missionary-teachers in China since 1894. The Weifang municipal government had invited former internees, their relatives and descendants, to attend the celebration, paying all of their expenses except airfare. My wife Jane and I were accompanied by my daughter Rachel Alvelais, her husband Rob and their three daughters – Rachel, Teresa and Gabriella – and Jane's grandson Cooper Abedin.

During our visit, Jane took numerous photos, and at the end of each day Don posted them, along with a running narrative of the day's events, on Leopold Pander's Weih sien website so that those former internees who were unable to attend could share in the celebration.

The text of these daily postings and "thumbnails" of each day's photos appear below. Higher resolution photos suitable for downloading and printing may be found at the following web address: <http://www.weih sien-paintings.org/DonMenzi/indexFrame.htm>

Clicking on the name under my photo will bring up our original report back to absent Weih sieners, You will also find links to a slide show comparing images of Weih sien buildings as they appeared 60 years ago with how they look today, to the animated PowerPoint slide show that was presented as part of the 2005 celebration and to another depicting the 1943 voyage of the prisoner-exchange ship, Gripsholm, on which the Wilders were repatriated.

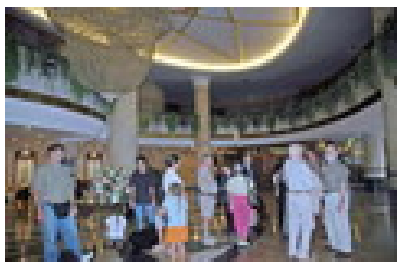
Don and Jane Weprin Menzi



DAY 1



--- Our plane landed at Weifang (formerly Weih sien), which is now the center of a major metropolitan area in Shandong Province.



Our own family group (8 of us, spanning 3 generations) were met at the airport by a number of young volunteers from Weifang University holding aloft signs proclaiming "Welcome Weih sieners." A bus took us on the 1 ½ hour trip to Weifang. The highway was bordered by farm lands, many of them with large fields of young trees, similar to poplars, planted in rows - often with corn (or more likely kaoliang = sorghum) planted among them. We were told that the trees were also a crop - their wood would be used to make furniture. I don't remember the trees from the time when we traveled the same route about eight years earlier, and I suspect that they are a new crop tied to China's new manufacturing industries - more profitable than foodstuffs.



On the bus we met Bill (I forgot his last name – sorry, Bill), who is working on a documentary for our Public Broadcasting System on the experience of children who were interned in Japanese camps, Weih sien and others. He says he sees this as the last great untold story of World War II - and he intends to be the one to tell it. We hadn't heard from him before because he's a Weih sien@topica.com "lurker" - following all the emails, but not sending any of his own. He hopes that the program will air sometime next year.



--- The opening banquet followed a brief rest at the hotel. The dishes were delicious, and all were identifiable (not always the case with banquets here) with an emphasis on seafood - Shandong is a coastal province, after all. Weifang's Mayor Li and others gave brief welcoming speeches. Personally, I was especially pleased to meet some of the people whom I had gotten to know through the topica.com email group.

After the banquet some of us got to see part 2 of a four-part TV documentary about the story of Weih sien on the local television station. (It was later broadcast on China's national TV.)

A very full day is planned for tomorrow and Thursday. Stay tuned...

DAY 2



--- Three buses took us from the hotel to the site of the celebration, now the grounds of Weifang Middle School #2. As we stepped from the busses we were instantly swept forward into the strong, swift rhythm of classic Western orchestral march music, loudly broadcast from speakers hidden in the trees.



--- At the main gate was a sign in Chinese and English, "Long Live the Unity of the World People"...



...and a red banner reading “60th Anniversary of the Liberation of Weihsen Concentration Camp.” It was a dramatic and exciting beginning to what would be a wonderful day. I would estimate that the crowd surrounding the procession of internees numbered well over 1,000, mostly local citizens of Weifang, of all ages, all with smiling faces.



--- We walked down an aisle between two rows of students, rhythmically waving colorful wreaths...



...down which we processed to our seats.



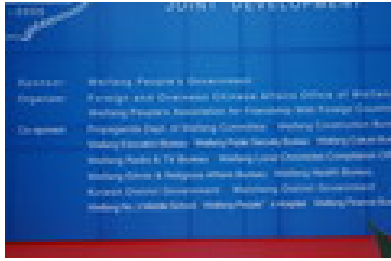
Some of us were tempted to return a young soldier's welcoming salute.



We passed through happy crowds with welcoming smiles ...



... all the while accompanied by the stirring classics of western orchestral marching music.



--- A total of 10 organizations were listed as sponsors, co-sponsors, or organizers of the event.



---Our family group had second-row seats.



--- Donald Bishop, a member of the U.S. diplomatic corps, represented the U.S. government at the ceremony.



--- Weifang's Vice-Mayor Li, whom we had first met when he was a member of the delegation that visited the U.S. and elsewhere in preparation for the event, acted as chief welcomer and enthusiastic host.



--- He pointed me to where Mr. Sui Shudeh, Assistant Director of the Wefang government's Foreign Affairs Translation Center, was standing.



--- Sui Shudeh had been our main contact during the advance delegation's visit to New York several months before the celebration. He is an exceptionally competent translator not only of words but of cultures, and many of us have also come to consider him to be a friend.



--- The ceremony took place in what once was the semi-circular courtyard in front of Building #23. The program began at 9:15 am, the exact time to the minute when U.S. paratroopers had dropped from the sky on August 17, sixty years ago. Today it began spectacularly with fireworks (!!!), each exploding shell releasing a tiny, colorful parachute - seemingly hundreds of them - which floated slowly across the gray sky.



--- Then came speeches by representatives from each of the sponsoring organizations.



--- We found out later that the seated (and hatted) Chinese gentleman being interviewed by a reporter is the youngest son of one of the Chinese "sanitation workers" who carried out the cess-pool and WC contents for use as fertilizer by local farmers. His father had risked his life carrying messages into and out of the camp on slips of paper wadded in his mouth, and he had also helped Tipton and Hummel in their escape, at great danger to himself. Today the son was the official representative of all the local Chinese who had helped Weihsien internees through their difficult years by operating the "black market" and acting as secret go-betweens.



--- Mary Taylor Previte, who was 12 years old at the time of the liberation represented the "Weihsieners."



--- Even the many young children in the friendly crowd appeared to be fascinated, both by the foreigners and by the event itself.



--- Touching their hearts seemed to be their way of expressing their heart-felt welcome to the returning internees.



--- The ceremony also included the dedication of a plaque for the Weihsien Concentration Camp Exhibition House, which contains a great many photos and artifacts from the internment camp, all well-displayed around the walls of what had once been the general storage house for internees' in the "out of bounds" area.



--- One of the real highlights of the ceremony was the very moving performance by a chorus of young girls who sang both spiritedly and sweetly.



--- The singers also moved about and gestured to the music in perfect unison, showing signs of much practice and many rehearsals.



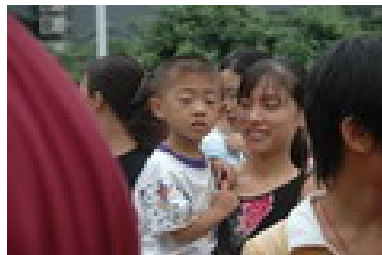
--- Their performance was climaxed by the release of 1,500 "peace doves" (really pigeons), one for each of the liberated internees, which ended the opening ceremony.

I was amused to see my son-in-law Robert wiping some of their droppings off his shoulder, thinking that they could have deliberately targeted him because he is a

professional teacher of traditional Japanese martial arts - until Jane pointed out that they had hit my own shoulder, as well.



--- The walk to the Exhibition House provided an opportunity to meet the local "Weifangers" who had gathered to observe the ceremony and who were touchingly eager to express their greetings to the "Weihsieners." Attractive young people were especially numerous and very friendly, as were proud parents eager for us to meet their children.

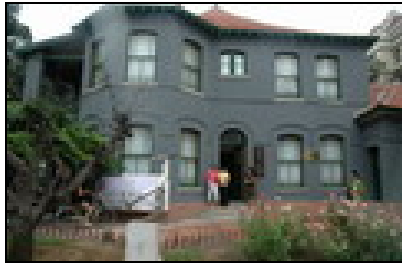




--- Teenagers expressed with their smiles their appreciation of Jane's grandson, Cooper.



--- These totally spontaneous expressions of heartfelt, warm welcome to the former internees by individual Weifangers of all ages was one of the most moving aspects of the whole day.



--- The former “general storage” house (formerly “out-of-bounds”) is now the Weifang Middle school’s Historical Museum.



--- A group of teenage students observed the crowds from the front door of the museum...



... which houses many historical texts and mounted enlargements of photos and of internees’ paintings, obtained from the Weihsien web site.



--- Here Rachel, with her daughters and Cooper is standing next to photos that were taken at our home in New York when the advance delegation visited us earlier in the year.



--- We were impressed that our hosts had been able to assemble so much about Weih sien and to create the locations to display it so effectively.



--- Next came the ceremonial wreath-laying at the Eric Lidell monument. Associated Press photographer Elizabeth Dalziel, a professional, was successful in getting close enough to the ceremony to photograph the wreath-laying and Steven Metcalf speaking.



--- Metcalf spoke movingly about how, when his own shoes had worn out during the cold winter, Eric Liddell had given him a pair of his own running shoes.



--- He also told of his own work since the war in which, inspired by Lidell's example of praying for one's enemies, he has attempted to bring about reconciliation between Chinese and Japanese people.



--- The crowd around the Eric Liddel Monument prevented Jane from getting any close-up photos of the laying of a memorial wreath, but she later got this one of the monument itself.



---Walking to yet another location provided an additional chance to meet and be greeted by Weifangers, some cheerful, some solemn, all excited.





--- We found that the first floor of the old hospital building has been converted into an art gallery for paintings and calligraphy, most of it related to the Weih sien camp.

Mr. Han, who was a member of the delegation that came to the U.S. and is himself a gifted artist, points to the dedicatory text in one of his landscape ink drawings, done in a traditional Chinese style. (One of his drawings now hangs on the wall of our living room.) Mr. Han is also head of the local TV station, which featured extensive coverage of the celebration and the events that it commemorated.



--- Don, in turn, points out to a China Cable TV interviewer copies of four of the watercolors of Weih sien wildflowers that had been painted by his grandmother, Gertrude Wilder, while they were interned. She was only one of a number of interned artists who were able to find beauty behind Weih sien's barbed-wire walls.



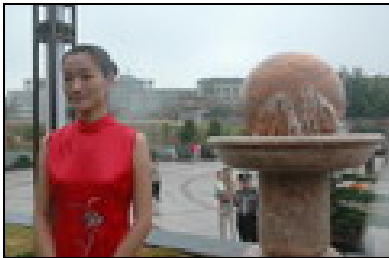
--- Mr. Han introduced Don to another of Weifang's deputy mayors.



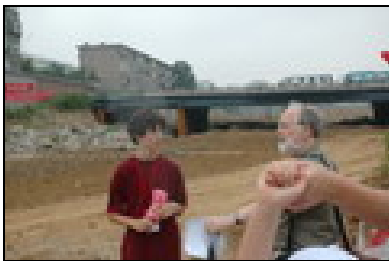
--- Next came the ringing of the enormous "peace bell" by Michael Calvert, the oldest "Weihsien" present, together with a little girl from Weifang.



--- The Weihsien Memorial Park includes an impressive monument based on the day's theme – “flying peace” – a reflection of the fact that a number of relatives and descendants of “Flying Tigers” – American fighter pilots who had volunteered to fight for China before the U.S. had officially entered the war – were also part of the day's celebration.



--- A granite ball rotated by flowing water and a small waterfall are just two of the ways that the park's architects used water imaginatively in their landscape design.



--- The "little stream" shown in some "over the wall" paintings is being widened and deepened to enable small boats to land at the memorial park.



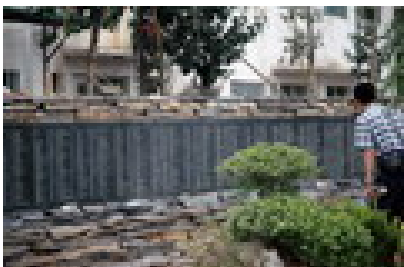
--- An elaborate “tingtze” (pavilion) and a small waterfall could be seen on the other side of the stream.



--- The walks through the various parts of the park also provided guests with an opportunity to meet and talk to each other. Here Don gets acquainted with former internee George Kaposhilin.



--- A large cast bronze relief depicts the Weihsien internees’ at their work assignments, while maintaining their dignity in the face of oppression.



--- Finding the names of former internees on the memorial wall containing the names, in English and Chinese, of inmates who were liberated was a moving experience for many.



--- We left the compound grounds through quite an elaborate park and recreation area, still under construction, that again includes some interesting use of water, here forming a series of arches, under which my grandchildren enjoyed running.



--- A view from the hospital looking out over the Weihsien Memorial Park, still under construction.



--- Leaving the compound, looking back from the bridge to northeast of the hospital, reveals how much major landscaping work is being done to deepen the former small stream.



--- The Weifangers said goodbye to the Weihsieners as we boarded the buses to return to the hotel.



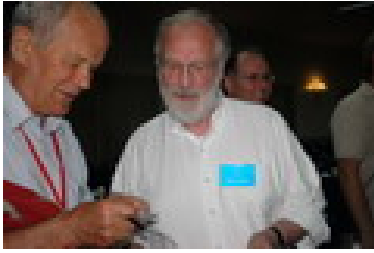
--- After lunch and a brief rest, we reconvened for the "First Meeting of the Council of Friendship Party Between Weifang People and the Former Weihsieners." This included speeches by the Mayor and other local officials and by internees representing the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and, most warmly applauded of all, by Zhang Xihong, the son of the former "sanitation worker" who had helped two internees escape from Weihsien's walls.



--- After the speeches the constitution of the newly formed Party organization was read and adopted unanimously by those present. I'm sure the constitution in its entirety will be added to the web site.



--- Mary Previte, now a New Jersey legislator, talking with Suchi Swift, the great-grand daughter of one of Mary's camp heroes, Hugh Hubbard and Suchi's boyfriend, Geoffrey Mazzaro.



--- Following the meeting I presented a "walking tour" slide show and took the names of anyone present who wanted to be sent a playable copy of the CD.

--- After dinner, most of our group went to a Commemorative Theatrical Performance, which I unfortunately missed in order to work on the photos to be send back to Leopold for posting of the day's events.

--- It had been a long and wonderful day – far beyond anything that any of us imagined would take place. The Weifang government officials have organized a great event, which we all deeply appreciate, but the real stars for many of us were the ordinary citizens of Weifang, who turned out in great numbers, and whose genuine, open warmth and sincere expressions of welcome transcended any language barriers, making many of us feel like this was truly a homecoming, even for those of us who weren't there 60 years ago.

More about tomorrow, tomorrow.

DAY 3



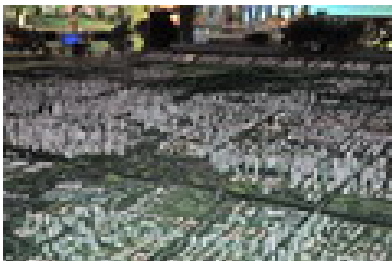
--- Thursday, August 18. Today we visited the Foton Heavy Industry Agricultural Machinery Co., Ltd. - of special interest to anyone who (like me) likes to know how things are put together.



--- Today they are making tractors, but a lot of other really cool farm vehicles and machinery were parked on the lot – combines, front-end-loaders, and other things I couldn't name, but to anyone whose kids ever played with Tonka or "matchbox" toys, these looked like great big toys that would be fun to drive around the sand box.



--- Mary Previte, always ready for a challenge, waves from a half-finished tractor as it moves down the assembly line.



--- Next stop was the Fuwah International Conference & Exhibition Center, where we saw a huge 3-dimensional scale model of the Weifang municipal area's "Ecological City Plan." The rivers lighted up and spotlights from above shifted around to highlight various districts of the urban area as the narrator described the problems being addressed and the plans for each area's future development. The "ecological" aspect to the plan, I was told later, was because the Wei River - from which Weihsien/Weifang gets its name - was extremely sluggish and foul-smelling, and deepening and improving the waterway is one of the key elements of the plan.

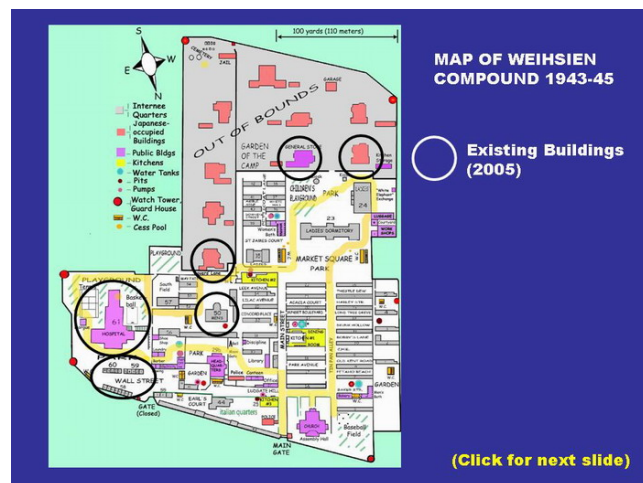
The only drawback to this elaborate demonstration was that it was entirely in Chinese, partly because the exhibit was completed only a few days before our arrival, and partly because we are not the target

audience of this very complex and obviously costly display.

--- A change of schedule allowed us to stop again at the Weihsien Center site where, without the crowds of yesterday, we were able to wander at our own pace around the grounds, swapping stories about what had happened to us where, and getting to know each other better. Jane and I had the good fortune of meeting a Chinese couple whom I might have called elderly once, but wouldn't now because they are close to our own age, who had lived near the camp and remembered that time well. We took their address and plan to send them this photo and copies of some of the paintings of their own village, viewed "over the wall" over 60 years ago.



--- I already had a mental image of the physical layout of the Weihsien compound based on my work on the "walking tour" presentation I had prepared for the ceremony. It took me a while, however, to get the old buildings that are still standing fitted into my mental "map" of the compound – a process rather like playing with those toy puzzles that we give to very little children, with five or six cutout shapes into which they are supposed to fit various animal-shaped pieces. I finally "got it" and it was quite moving to be able to visualize where on the map I was standing while looking at the hospital and other old buildings that I had only seen in internees' paintings and sketches.

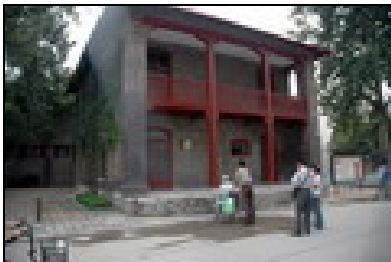




--- Next to the hospital were two rows of 9 x 12 rooms, similar to those that housed George and Gertrude Wilder in 1943.



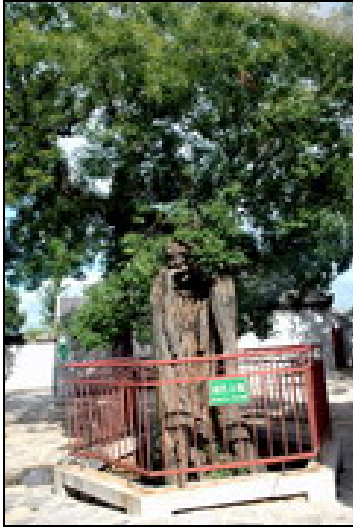
--- The Block 50 men's dormitory has been converted to a residence for retired teachers.



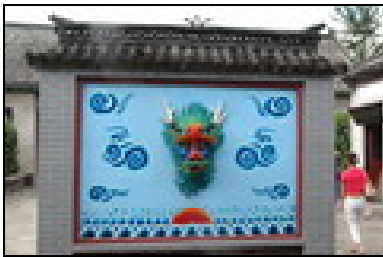
--- We also found one of the formerly "out-of-bounds" Japanese-occupied residences.



--- After lunch we were taken to a kite museum and factory. Weifang is the kite-making capital of China, and therefore of the world. We were led through a maze of separate, one-storey buildings, each with a room or two containing historic designs by famous local artisans, including both kites and "New Year" paintings of symbolic figures, traditionally hung anew each year to bring good fortune during the coming 12 months.



--- We passed a 600 year old tree dating from the Ming dynasty...

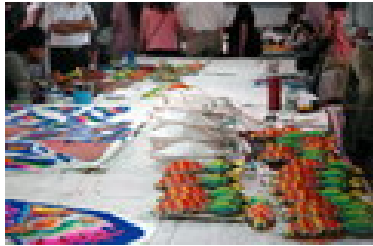


...and a colorful sign leading the way to the kite factory.



--- We finally arrived at the actual workshops where kites were being hand-painted and where bamboo sticks were being heated and bent into the shapes of birds, fish, dragon-flies, etc.

--- Despite being called a “factory” it was really more of a workshop since all of the kites made there are hand-made and decorated by young artists.



--- The visit was climaxed by a visit to the factory's store, where many of us bought kites for our children (so we said).



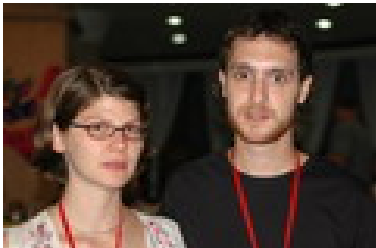
--- That evening after dinner, group pictures were taken of all those who were actually interned, and also of those internees who had previously been students at the Chefoo boarding school. The entire school, teachers and students, had been interned in 1943 and many of the young students did not have a chance to see their parents for the whole duration of the war, which for China had begun in 1937. After they were liberated, some found that their parents did not even recognize them after a seven-year absence, during which natural maturation and war had wrought such changes.



Jane then took some individual portrait-shots of former internees.



--- Jerome and Estelle Cliff Horne



--- Hugh Hubbard's great-granddaughter Suchi Swift with Geoffrey Mazzaro



--- Beryl Goodland's daughter, Brenda



--- Gerald and Evelyn Walsham with Zhou Bao



--- Stephen Metcalf



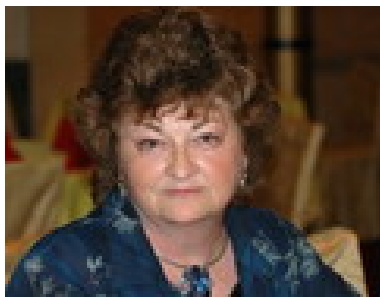
--- Peter Bazire



--- Edmund Cooke and Georgianna Kniseley



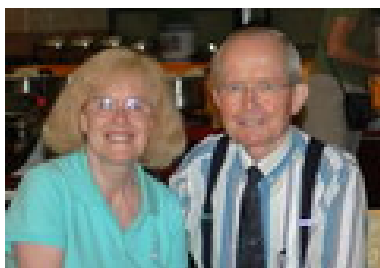
--- Beryl Goodland



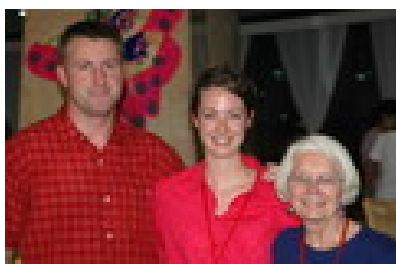
--- Diana Lindley



--- Maida Campbell with Cathy, James and Ian



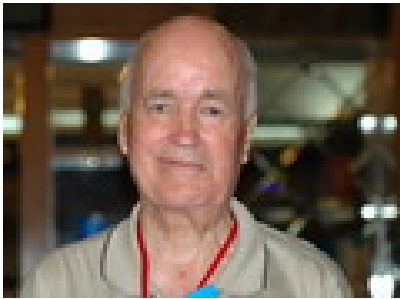
---Mary Taylor Previte and her brother, James Hudson Taylor III, descendants of Hudson Taylor (1832 – 1905), a pioneer Protestant missionary from England.



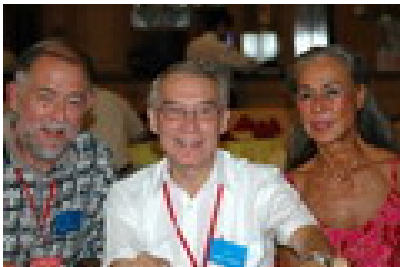
--- Mary Broughton with son James and fiancé Carolyn Christenson



--- Joyce Cooke Bradbury, with son and grand-daughter, Danielle



--- David Birch



-- Francis Joyce, Ted Pearson and Angela Cox Elliott



--- A sketch of Ted Pearson by artist William A. Smith, done in 1945, shortly after Weih sien's liberation. The caption reads, "A Eurasian boy, one of my special friends."

A Eurasian boy, one of my special friends



--- Margaret Beard and Sui Shude



--- Michael Calvert



--- Stanley and Jane Fairchild



--- Neil Yorkston



--- David Beard



--- Donald Menzi and Zhou Bao



---George Kaposhilin with his son, Nicholas



--- Cameron Copeland

Cameron Copeland



--- Stuart and Marian B. Laughlin



--- Zhang Xihong

Below, clockwise from the left: Donald Menzi and Jane Weprin-Menzi; Don's daughter Rachel Alvelais; Jane's grandson Cooper Abedin with Don's grand-daughters, Teresa, Rachel and Gabriella Alvelais; and Rachel's husband Rob Alvelais.



Thus ended one of the most memorable experiences in the lives of those of us who were able to attend this spectacular event. It is difficult – no, really impossible – to imagine any way that the weekend’s celebration could have been improved.

In the words of Mary Taylor Previte,

“This whole celebration was a work of art.

Who did not weep when the announcer boomed out, “Exactly sixty years ago at this hour...”?

Who did not weep when fireworks exploded, with parachutes falling from the sky?

Who did not weep when hundreds of pigeons burst from their cages and soared free to the skies?

Weifang officials have earned our everlasting gratitude for their vision and their commitment of resources and artistic effort for this 60th anniversary celebration.”

All of us “Weihsieners” will remember for the rest of our lives the joyful, welcoming warmth expressed so eloquently without words by the local “Weifangers.” We are grateful to all those who created for us this amazing gift of a life-long memory.