
Our POW Christmas

Christine Helsby as told to Ed Erny

They had nothing to give to each other in that prison camp December 1944. They were worse than destitute. So how could they possibly give gifts to each other?

When I came to consciousness that chilly Christmas morning, I could almost feel the gray light seeping through the window just above my head. I turned to look out at the great stretches of brick wall, bristling with strands of electrified barbed wire, broken at intervals by menacing pillboxes that were manned by one of the omnipresent olive-uniformed Japanese guards. Within the wall of this former mission compound now lived a community of ill-fed, ill-clothed prisoners.

This was December 25, 1944, and I was lying on a rough grass mattress in the camp hospital, where I had been taken two weeks earlier for internal bleeding. An adjoining building served as a barracks for the mentally ill, and to one side of it lay a melancholy plot of ground that enfolded the swelling population of our dead.

My husband, Meredith, and I had come as mission-

aries to Peking in October 1940. Less than two months later our first child, Sandra Kay, was born. We had completed only one term of language study before Pearl Harbor. Suddenly we found ourselves prisoners of war. Following 14 months of house arrest, we were shipped by rail to Wei Hsien, a small village on the east coast, near the port of Ching Dao. There, on the compound newly converted into a prisoner-of-war camp, we were joined by 1,800 fellow internees—500 of them missionaries, the remainder of them businesspeople.

The long wall that ran its irregular course around the camp marked, for us, the outer limits of our world. Now, for 33 long months, we had been cut off from all reliable news sources. Were the Allies winning the war? losing the war? How much longer would we have to endure this ordeal? Not one of us knew. Few dared guess. Hope was hard to come by that bleak December.

But this morning would be different, must be different. This was Christmas Day.

Now the pale morning light, like a persistent hand, was stirring patients from their fitful sleep. Beside me I could hear the moans of an older woman suffering from pleurisy. Beyond her another patient, a pneumonia case, struggled for breath. Directly across from me a young mother was apparently dying of typhoid fever.

There were 16 beds and 16 patients in that barn-like women's ward. The once-well-furnished hospital had been left a shambles by troops who had been quartered there some months earlier. Now the building was crudely sectioned off into two large wards. Heroic doctors and nurses, themselves prisoners, gave unstintingly of their skill. But with almost no medicine available,

too often their best efforts ended in futility. For the most part, the old hospital served only to quarantine the sick and dying from the still-functioning members of our community.

Meredith worked as a cook in the main kitchen, one of the many tasks performed by prisoners who operated all the basic services of the camp. He was permitted to take one hour off between breakfast and lunch. We had agreed that during that time he would bring Sandy and the gifts to my bedside.

My gift for Meredith that Christmas was to be a well-thumbed but still-sturdy copy of *Matthew's Chinese-English Dictionary*, a book he long had coveted but never felt he could afford. I had discovered it at The White Elephant, a brick cubicle where outgrown and expendable commodities could be sold or bartered. The price was a full \$10. That was a lot of money at any time, but in camp where a rare "monthly" Red Cross allowance of \$5 was our only source of income, it was a fortune. I knew, however, that when the cash price for an item could not be met, the seller would often settle for the balance in accepted barter.



What could I barter? I went to our little black footlocker, one of the two pieces of luggage we had been permitted to bring into camp. There, in a corner, was all that remained of our little store of goods. Quickly I took inventory,

then took out a yard of new cloth and my prize can of strawberry jam. I had \$2 in my pocket and felt sure a friend would lend me two more. With these I bought *Matthew's Dictionary*.

Now I heard Meredith's familiar footsteps approaching from the far end of the ward and looked up. He was wearing a rough plaid mackinaw and too-short pants—both held together

by patch on patch.

Sandy skipped beside him, her blond curls bobbing, her brown eyes unnaturally large but glowing with excitement against her thin features. She wore dark-blue overalls I had fashioned from upholstery material. Her coat had been made from the remains of a fellow-missionary's tweed skirt. Together Med and Sandy clutched their presents, all wrapped in used notebook paper.

"Oh, Mommy," Sandy shouted gaily, "isn't it won-

derful? It's Christmas. Look! We brought presents!"

Meredith and Sandy sat beside me. A nurse thoughtfully procured the hospital's only screen and set it up against the foot of my bed for privacy. Now we were a family again. We were in our own world, and it was Christmas morning.

Meredith opened his pocket New Testament to the familiar account: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed . . ." Then we prayed.

"Mommy, Mommy! Can we have our presents now?" Sandy's little fingers were pulling impatiently at the stiff wraps.

Her "big gift" that Christmas was a wheelbarrow that Meredith had made from an old soap box. The single wheel had been purloined from the baby bed. The handles were scraps of wood gleaned from who knows where. Cliff, a camp teenager, had decorated the front of the barrow with a sketch of a bushy-tailed squirrel and Sandy's name in great block letters.

By any standard, it was a crude contraption. But to a 4-year-old who had never seen a dime store, an ice-cream cone, or a dolly that opens its eyes and wets, it was a treasure.

Sandy got other gifts, too. From a scrap of cloth no longer serviceable for mending garments, I had made a Humpty-Dumpty doll and had stuffed it with bits of thread and material swept from the community sewing room floor.

Another gift had not been completed before I was taken to the hospital. It was to have been a dollhouse. I had scrounged an old carton for the purpose and begged

two pages from a book of wallpaper samples a neighbor, for some unknown reason, had brought with her into camp. These, with the aid of scissors and dabs of wheat paste, were to have been fashioned into an exquisite doll mansion. But Sandy loved it just the same.

"OK, honey," Meredith said, "now come open your presents. Go on; open them."

One by one I removed the sheets of notebook paper from my gifts: three implements—crude, but to me, beautiful.

"It's a kitchen set," Meredith explained. "How do you like it?"

Our "kitchen" consisted of a brick stove built in one tiny corner of Block 14, No. 7. The 9" x 12" room was "home" to the three of us. At night Meredith had surreptitiously wrested bricks from the rubble of an old wall the guards had torn down. The stovepipe had been patiently assembled from 21 old tin cans. The burner, the most difficult part to procure, was a thick metal tile form. For it we had paid the exorbitant price of two full cans of evaporated milk. But what a difference that "kitchen" made. During the winter we would take coal dust, mix it with clay, and make a kind of fuel. Then we would buy and cook a few items from the camp canteen, where a limited and odd assortment of foodstuffs were now and then sold. Thus we managed to supplement the wearisome half-palatable mess hall diet that consisted mainly of fish soup, worm-ridden bread, eggplant, turnips, and a dark porridge made of "gaoling," a coarse grain used by Chinese to feed their swine. To

this was sometimes added bits of pork and an occasional ration of one egg per person.

The first item of my "kitchen set" was a baking pan (not that anyone would ordinarily have succeeded in identifying it as such). It had originally been an oversized sardine can of the sort our White Russian neighbors sometimes received in packages. The rough edges had been lovingly smoothed, and small handles had been fastened at each end. Now when our birthdays came and we got the usual two-cup ration of flour, we could have ourselves a birthday cake!

The next implement was a spatula made of real rubber. Meredith did not tell me until later that it had been carefully whittled from a discarded boot heel, a bonanza he had discovered in the camp trash heap.

Completing the set was a tea strainer. Afterward I learned that the patch of screening from which the gift had been devised was the remnant of a carefully scrubbed, well-boiled fly swatter.

My gift to Meredith was received with genuine amazement, and his delight repaid me many times over for my scheming.

The hour was over. Meredith had kissed me and rose to leave. Sandy flung her small arms around me.

"Mommy, Mommy, hurry up and get well so you can come back home," she said. Then they were gone.

Quietly I fingered the three objects on my bed. My kitchen set. My Christmas presents. Down the ward someone hummed, "O, come, all ye faithful, joyful and

triumphant . . ." No carol had ever sounded sweeter.

We spent 10 more months in the Wei Hsien compound, months that were the most difficult of my life. After a brief release from the hospital, I was returned to the same ward, this time because of typhoid. For 13 days I was semiconscious, haunted by strange obsessions, my body covered by a tormenting rash.

Finally, on August 12, a mudball thrown over the camp wall concealed a note informing us that the war had ended. Five days later U.S. paratroopers drifted into an adjacent field. With them came medicines, food, and the end of our ordeal.

God has given us many blessed Christmases since that dark December day in Wei Hsien. But nothing we have ever received has been more precious than those crude gifts.

What made those inherently worthless bits of trash so inestimably dear to us? In the absence of material things we compensated in the only way we could—by pouring our hearts into our gifts. Each of them so painstakingly secured, so meticulously shaped, said "I love you."

And this Christmas, when we gather around our ornamented tree partially hidden by a small mountain of gaily wrapped parcels, we'll think back to Wei Hsien and try to remember . . . try to remember.

Christine Helsby wrote for inspirational magazines during the second half of the twentieth century.