

BACK TO THE FUTURE

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Rotten meat

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Fearing the internees could make contact with the outside world or even escape, the Japanese covered the walls with electrified wires and set up searchlights and machine guns in the guard towers. The camp was under military management and the internees were forced to wear armbands displaying a large black letter to indicate their nationalities — “B” for British, “A” for American, and so on.

“We were there as a family and lived in a small room with no sanitary facilities. I have many memories of the camp, such as being counted by the Japanese three times a day, attending school, being hungry most of the time. I was 6, but still had to work. My job was that of a bell ringer, waking people for the first roll call. The latrines were awful because we moved from flush toilets to ‘squatters,’” Pearson recalled.

“We very seldom had meat, and when we did it was often rotten. We had a lot of eggplants, to the extent that afterward I could not eat eggplant until I was in my 30s. As children we still had school, but the teenagers also had jobs. My older brother worked as a cobbler,” he said. “Coffee and tea was reused, over and over. We arrived in late fall, around October, so our living quarters were very cold.”

Pearson remembered that the adults made young children eat powdered eggshells to prevent rickets. “They got eggs on the black market and the shells had to be saved and powdered. There’s nothing worse than eating a spoonful of powdered eggshell,” he said.

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Loss of dignity

Some people have called Weihhsien camp “the Oriental Auschwitz.”

“Because of the poor sanitary conditions and the shortages of food and medical care, several people died in the camp. But still I don’t agree with calling it ‘Auschwitz’ because there was no slaughter there. That’s the truth. Japan mainly wanted to humiliate the allied countries,” said Xia Baoshu, 82, a Weihhsien camp researcher and former



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PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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From left: Survivors look for their names on the memorial wall during a 2005 visit to the former Weihhsien Camp in Weifang, Shandong province, on the 60th anniversary of the World War II. The camp's hospital block is still standing. Survivors comfort one another during the 2005 visit.

president of Weifang People’s Hospital.

Mary Taylor Previte, 81, who later served in the New Jersey General Assembly, was interned at the age of 9.

“The second day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese soldiers appeared on the doorstep of our school. They said we were now prisoners of the Japanese. I remember so well when the Japanese came and marched the school away — perhaps 200 teachers, children and old people — to the concentration camp. I will never forget that day. A long, snaking line of children marching into the unknown, singing a song of hope from the Bible,” she said.

“Separated from our parents, we found ourselves crammed into a world of gut-wrenching hunger, guard dogs, bayonet drills, prison numbers and badges, daily roll calls, bed bugs, flies and unspeakable sanitation.”

A time of heroes

For Previte, the story of the camp is one of heroes, hope and triumph. It shaped her life.

“Weihhsien is a story of Chinese heroes — farmers who risked their lives to smuggle food over the wall to prisoners — we called it the ‘black market’ — and those who brought us food so generously when the war was over,” she said.

Xia recalled: “Some peasants operating the black market were caught red-handed and tortured. Some were killed. The camp was closely guarded. Apart from the Japanese, only Zhang Xingtai and his son, who cleaned the latrines, could enter and leave the camp freely. They took many risks to help internees deliver important messages and also helped Arthur W. Hummel (called Heng Anshi in Chinese) to escape,” he said.

Zhang Xihong, 84, Zhang Xingtai’s youngest son, remembered the aftermath. “After Heng escaped, the Japanese immediately caught my father and brother. They were heavily beaten and tortured, but neither gave in. They were finally released because of a lack of evidence. They came back with injuries and blood everywhere. They are heroes in my heart, because my father never regretted what he had done,” he said.

Zhang’s story was echoed by Wang Hao, director of the Weifang Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.

“The supply of food to the camp dwindled and the internees suffered a lot from long-term hunger. The local people donated more than \$100,000, a lot of money at that time, to buy food, medicines and necessities that they managed to send into the camp to help the internees survive the toughest periods,” he noted.

Hopes of survival

Pearson said the children were lucky because the adults quickly formed a camp committee. They restarted the school, hospital, and church, and even set up an entertainment committee that put on oratorios, plays and ballets.

Cheng Long, a professor at the Beijing Language and Culture University, has just returned to China from the US where he interviewed surviving internees. “The deeper I research the history, the more I am interested in it. I found that even in such harsh conditions, the internees maintained a positive attitude toward life. The Japanese didn’t allow the band to practice, so instead of making a sound, they kept practicing by gestures in the hope of playing on victory day. Even under such hardship and without freedom, their paintings still featured bright colors — flowers, green trees and blue skies,” he said.

The respect shown for education moved Sylvia Zhang, a post-doctoral researcher at Shih Hsin University in Taiwan. “Even in the camp, the teachers still followed strict teaching guidelines just like in Britain. They held the Oxford Local Examination in the camp for higher-grade students to help them deal with the changeable future. It’s the reason that many of the child internees were suc-

cessful after liberation,” she said.

Previte said that although children from her school were separated from their parents, the missionary teachers and adults did everything they could to protect them.

“The teachers would never let students give up. They insisted on good manners. We could be sitting on wooden benches at wooden tables in the mess hall and eating the most awful-looking glop out of a soap dish or an empty tin can, but those hero-teachers kept repeating the rules: Sit up straight. Do not stuff food in your mouth. Do not talk while you have food in your mouth,” she recalled.

Liberation

“The Japanese army was losing ground in most of China in 1945 and victory was almost assured, but the news was blocked. It wasn’t until the US arranged rescue planes to liberate the camp on Aug 17, 1945, that people knew their days in hell were over,” said Cheng.

Liberation came as a surprise to Previte. “It was a hot and windy day. I was sick with an upset stomach in the hospital when I heard the drone of an airplane over the camp. Racing to the window, I watched it sweep lower, slowly lower, and then circle again. It was a giant plane, emblazoned with an American star. Beyond the treetops its belly opened. I

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The long years of malnourishment affected the children’s physical development. Even after 70 years, the experience of the camp can provoke nightmares among former internees.

Pearson said that after being so hungry for more than three years, he will eat almost anything now.

“I am obsessed with food, so I do all the cooking. More important, the camp experience made a very strong impression on me. It took a long time before I could deal with the Japanese, even though as an adult I went to live in Hong Kong with my family and had to do business with the Japanese. The people are fine, but the government has never acknowledged what they did to us,” he said.

Previte said conflict is a catastrophe that destroys everything. “War and hate and violence never open the way to peace. Weihhsien shaped me. I will carry Weihhsien in my heart forever.”

Contact the author at hena@chinadaily.com.cn

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Returning to the camp

Of those interned in the camp, the only person I am in contact with is my cousin who was born there. As you can imagine, we survivors were children at the time, and our parents decamped all over the world afterwards.

I returned to the camp in 2005, when the city of Weifang decided to host a week of meetings for the survivors.

Only seven buildings are left, one being a block of rooms like the one in which I lived, although it’s not the same one. Even though the buildings are now surrounded by the city, I recognized them all, even those in which the Japanese lived. I remember one of them especially well, because my brother and I would steal coal from the basement. I also recognized the hospital where I had my tonsils removed.

Mostly, my feelings were pride at the accuracy of my memory after all these years.

I was 70 in 2005 and I was surprised that the city had built a memorial wall with all of our names inscribed on it.

Edmund Pearson spoke with He Na.

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Connecting with the world

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I remember one of the US internees told me that Weihhsien camp is not only a part of Chinese history but also a part of US history too. The unique history of Weihhsien camp has provided a connection with the rest of the world.

To allow more people at home and abroad to know about this history, including key events and how people helped each other to survive the hard times, the Weifang government attached great importance to the investigations into the history of the camp. Staff members are in a race against time to collect information and stories 70 years after the event because most of the internees have died.

Also, the government is drawing up a long-term plan for the camp, and we hope to restore some of the buildings and to make the few buildings that still stand into a camp-themed memorial park.

Next year will be the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, and a series of memorial activities will be carried out. One of the most important will invite survivors to return to Weifang, where seminars will be held to further study the period.

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Weih sien: Life and death in the shadow of the Empire of the Sun

By He Na and Ju Chuanjiang in Weifang, Shandong province (China Daily)

Updated: 2014-02-20 09:21:37

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Time never washes away memory of WWII internment camps, report He Na and Ju Chuanjiang in Weifang, Shandong province.

In the coastal city of Weifang, Shandong province, stand several dark, gray European-style buildings from the 19th century.

The passage of time has left them with peeling walls, broken windows and sunken foundations that disguise their former state, but they are a unique part of Chinese history.

Many residents are unaware of the story of these inconspicuous dwellings, now dwarfed by a middle school and a hospital.

Nearby, a well-designed square houses a 20-meter sculp-

ture that depicts a group of foreigners holding hands with Chinese people. The base is covered by carved Chinese characters that spell the names, ages, professions and nationalities of 2,008 people - 327 of them children - from more than 30 countries.

On closer inspection, the visitor discovers the names include renowned politicians, artists, scientists and even sportsmen: R. Jaegher, a foreign-born adviser to Chiang



PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
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Kai-shek; the Reverend W.M. Hayes, president of the former Huabei Theological Seminary; Arthur W. Hummel, former US ambassador to China; and Eric Liddell, the British athlete who won the 400m gold medal at the 1924 Olympic Games.

But how did a third-tier Chinese city manage to attract so much foreign talent?

The story begins in December 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, immediately changing the status of

Westerners in China's coastal regions, turning them from untouchable neutrals into enemy aliens. Within a few months all Allied Westerners in Japanese-occupied China were interned in camps.

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