

The End of My War

by J.G. Ballard

HAD THE WAR ENDED? For days, in that second week of August 1945, rumours had swept Lunghua camp. Shanghai lay eight miles to the north, beyond the abandoned villages and paddy fields, and I remember staring for hours at the apartment buildings of the French Concession along the horizon. The Swiss and Swedish neutrals who had lived there throughout the war would be tuning their short-wave radios to the latest news of the American bombing raids on Japan and the reported peace negotiations.

But in Lunghua camp we knew nothing. Their work-tasks forgotten, the British internees gathered in groups below the balcony of the Japanese commandant's offices in F block, watching the edgy guards for the smallest clue. The rest of us stood outside the huts and dormitory buildings, gazing at the strangely silent sky. Every day the Mustangs and B-29s had attacked the nearby Japanese airfield and the Shanghai dockyards, but now they had failed to appear. Our food supplies had broken down weeks ago, and we were kept alive only by the emergency rations of the Swiss Red Cross.

I waited for my father to announce that the war had ended, but he knew as little as I did. He and my mother sat in our little room in G block as Margaret, my seven-year-old sister, played outside with the other children. Two-and-a-half years of imprisonment, sharing their rice congee and sweet potatoes with me, had desperately drained them. I

sensed that they knew something they had decided to keep from me, fearing that our years of internment might end in some sudden and brutal way.

Then, on August 8, we woke to find that the Japanese guards had disappeared during the night. At last we were sure that the war had ended! People gathered silently at the open gates, peering at the dusty road to Shanghai. A few of the bolder men stepped through the barbed-wire fence, testing the empty air. I joined them, and cautiously walked to a grave-mound two hundred yards away. I looked back at the camp, at the intense, crowded world that for so long had been my home. Freedom and the war's end seemed fraught with danger, like the silent sky. I ran back to the wire, glad to be within the safety of the camp again.

Others had already decided to leave Lunghua for good. Half a dozen British men from E block stepped through the wire and set off across the fields for Shanghai, confidently waving goodbye to the camp. They returned the next day, lying unconscious in the trucks that brought another squad of Japanese soldiers to guard the camp. After carousing in the bars of downtown Shanghai the six Britons had been arrested by the Kempeitai, the Japanese Gestapo, and severely beaten.

Enraged by their treatment, a crowd of English and Belgian women gathered below the commandant's balcony. Standing in their tattered cotton frocks, they screamed ►

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► abuse at the impassive Japanese soldiers, necklaces of spittle shining on their breasts.

Then at last it was all over. The day after Hirohito's broadcast, we heard from the Swiss Red Cross that the war had ended. The Japanese armies had agreed to lay down their arms. We were told of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which had vaporized both cities and brought the war to a sudden halt.

'Is the war over?' I asked my father.

'Really, really over?'

'Yes, it's really over.' My father stared at me sombrely. 'Jamie, you'll miss Lunghua.'

Much as I might miss Lunghua, I was keen to see Shanghai again and visit our house in Amherst Avenue. Most of the 2000 internees remained in the camp, too tired to make their way on foot to the city, and without money or jobs to support them. Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese armies were far inland, and the nearest American forces were on the island of Okinawa. Meanwhile the countryside around Lunghua was a zone of danger, roamed by undisciplined Japanese troops, destitute peasants and gangs of leaderless soldiers of the Chinese puppet forces. It would be days before the Allied advance guard arrived and took control.

The B-29s had returned and flew slowly over the camp at little more than five hundred feet, bomb doors open. This time they were dropping food supplies, cartons of C rations filled with unimaginable treasures – tins of Spam and Klim, packs of Lucky Strikes and Chesterfields, and bars of hard,

gritty chocolate that flooded my mouth with an overpowering sweetness. The parachutes sailed over the camp, landing in the nearby fields and canals, and parties of internees ran out to seize them from the Chinese peasants, forgetting that they too were Allied civilians.

Unsettled by all this, I decided to walk to Shanghai. Three days after Hirohito's broadcast, and without telling my parents, I made my way to the northern perimeter of the camp, beyond the old shower house, and climbed through the barbed wire.

In front of me was a terrain of derelict canals and deserted villages. To my right the Japanese military airfield lay between the camp and the broad arm of the Whangpoo River. Lunghua pagoda, converted by the Japanese into a flak tower, rose into the humid August air. During the American raids the pagoda had lit up like a Christmas tree, tracers streaming towards the low-flying Mustangs, but now its guns were silent and unmanned.

Avoiding the airfield, with its restless Japanese sentries, I climbed the embankment of the Hangchow-Shanghai railway line, and set off between the humming rails. Half an hour later I approached a small wayside station, where a platoon of Japanese soldiers squatted among their rifles and ammunition boxes, waiting for a train that would never come.

When I was twenty yards away I saw that they had taken a prisoner, a young Chinese in black trousers and white shirt. They had tied him to a post with telephone wire cut from the poles beside the tracks, and one ►

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▲ of the soldiers was now slowly strangling him. The Chinese rolled his head as the wire tightened, singing to himself in a high voice.

The other soldiers had lost interest in the dying man and watched me walk up to them without comment, curiously eyeing my ragged khaki shorts and shirt. I wanted to tell them that the war was over, but I scarcely believed it myself, and I knew that the war's end carried little meaning for these Japanese soldiers. Caring nothing for their own lives, they cared nothing for the lives of others.

Leaving the station, I walked away along the railway line. The choking sing-song of the dying Chinese floated on the air as he sang himself towards his death. I have never forgotten that sound, but at the time, regrettably, I accepted this casual murder as no more than one of the minor realities of war.

Two hours later, thirsty and exhausted, I reached the western suburbs of Shanghai. At the end of Amherst Avenue I stopped at the house of my closest friends, the Kendal-Wards, who were interned in another of the camps near Shanghai. Hoping to see them, I walked up the steps to the open front door, and gazed through it at the sky above. The house was a brick shell. Everything had been stripped by the passing Chinese. Joists and floorboards, roof timbers and door-frames, pipes and electric cables had gone, leaving only the ghosts of the games we had played as children.

A few hundred yards away was the Ballard house at 31 Amherst Avenue. The roof and windows were still intact, and when I rang

the bell the door was opened by a young Chinese soldier in a puppet army uniform.

'This is my house,' I told him. He tried to bar my way with his rifle, but when I pushed past him he gave up, aware that for him too the war was over. I stared at the silent rooms, which seemed strangely grand and formal after the shabby clutter of Lunghua.

Everything was in place – the carpets, furniture and bookshelves, the cooker and large refrigerator in the American-style kitchen. The house had been occupied by a general in the puppet army, and the war had ended too abruptly for him to steal its entire contents.

I wandered through the aimless house, trying to put a hundred memories of my childhood into their right places. But I had forgotten too much, and felt like a stranger visiting myself. I climbed to my room on the top floor and lay on the bed, looking at the empty shelves where I had kept my *Chums* annuals and American comics, and at the rusty hooks in the ceiling from which I had hung my model planes. Most of my mind was still in Lunghua, but a small part of it had come home.

My parents had arrived in Shanghai in 1929, aboard a P&O liner that took five weeks to make the long voyage from Southampton. I was born in the Shanghai General Hospital the following year. My father ran a textile firm, the China Printing and Finishing Company, a subsidiary of the Manchester-based Calico Printers Association. Shanghai in the 1930s was the Paris of the Pacific, ►

☞ In my school classroom there were empty desks, as families left Shanghai for the safety of Hong Kong and Singapore. The steamers leaving the Bund were crowded with Europeans turning their backs on the city. ☞

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► one of the gaudiest cities in the world, a stronghold of unlimited venture capitalism. With a Chinese population of five million, and a hundred thousand Europeans and Americans, it was a place of bizarre contrasts, of foetid back alleys and graceful boulevards, of skyscrapers and Provencal villas, art deco apartment blocks and half-timbered Tudor mansions.

Driven to the Cathedral School by the family chauffeur, I looked out at a lurid realm of gambling dens and opium parlours, beggar kings, rickshaw coolies and mink-coated prostitutes. Each morning the trucks of the British-dominated administration toured the International Settlement and removed the bodies of the Chinese who had died during the night of disease and starvation. If Shanghai's neon lights were the world's brightest, its pavements were the hardest.

Although protected by chauffeurs and White Russian nannies, I was soon aware of a darker Shanghai, of kidnappings, gangster killings, and political bombings as the Chinese communists kept up their underground struggle against Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang. The first sign that the lights would really dim came in 1937, when Japanese forces invaded China and seized its coastal cities. They respected the International Settlement, the central district of Shanghai, but bitter fighting took place in the outlying suburbs. The combined land, naval and air assault was a preview of the battlegrounds of the Second World War.

Huge areas of the city were razed to the

ground, and a stray bomb in the Avenue Edward VII killed more than a thousand people. Amherst Avenue lay outside the International Settlement, and when artillery shells from rival Chinese and Japanese batteries began to fly over our roof we moved to a rented house in the comparative safety of the French Concession. Neglected by its owner, the swimming pool had begun to drain. Looking down at its sinking surface, I felt that more than water was ebbing away.

When the fighting ended, Chiang's defeated armies withdrew into the vast interior of China, and we returned to Amherst Avenue. Life in the International Settlement resumed its glittery whirl. A week after the ceasefire my parents and their friends set out on a tour of the silent battlefields to the south of Shanghai. A motorcade of chauffeur-driven Packards and Buicks, filled with children, smartly dressed mothers and their straw-hatted husbands, moved past the shattered trenches and earth bunkers, like the landscapes of the Somme I had seen in the sepia photographs of the *Illustrated London News*.

Skirts in their hands, my mother and her fellow wives stepped through the hundreds of cartridge cases. The skeleton of a horse lay on the bank of a creek, and the canals were filled with dead Chinese soldiers, arms and legs stirred by the water. Belts of machine-gun bullets snaked through the grass, and live ammunition was scattered among the discarded webbing. A boy at the Cathedral School who picked up a grenade during ►

Why did my parents and so many others stay on in Shanghai, risking their families' lives? ♡

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▶ another outing lost his hand when it exploded. Later, to his credit, he became a champion swimmer.

The Japanese controlled the Shanghai suburbs, and on the way to school I passed through their military checkpoints. By now, in 1940, I owned my first bicycle, and on the pretext of visiting the Kendal-Wards I began to take long rides around the city, pedalling through the confused traffic and avoiding the huge French trams. Sometimes I reached the Bund, and watched the Japanese cruiser *Idzumo* and the British and American gunboats, HMS *Petrel* and USS *Wake*. The amiable British tommyes manning their sand-bagged emplacements often invited me to join them, getting me to clean their rifles with their pull-throughs and giving me their regimental cap badges.

As I moved through the checkpoints I was even more drawn to the Japanese soldiers. Many were ruthlessly brutal to the Chinese farmers and rickshaw coolies trying to enter the International Settlement, and in my mind I can still see an hysterical peasant woman near the Avenue Joffe tram terminal, screaming over her bayoneted husband as he died between the wheels of the passing Lincolns and Studebakers. I knew that the Japanese soldiers were brave, and I hoped the British tommyes would never have to fight them. But the Japanese had a strain of melancholy that I admired, a quality not much in evidence among the party-going Europeans and Americans whom my parents knew.

By 1941 everyone was aware of the larger

conflict that would soon break out. In my school classroom there were empty desks, as families left Shanghai for the safety of Hong Kong and Singapore. The steamers leaving the Bund were crowded with Europeans turning their backs on the city. Once when I cycled to a friend's home in the Avenue Foch I found his apartment abandoned to the wind, unwanted possessions scattered across the beds. Reality, I was fast learning, was little more than a stage set whose actors and scenery could vanish overnight.

Why did my parents and so many others stay on in Shanghai, risking their families' lives? They knew of the Rape of Nanking, when 20,000 Chinese civilians were butchered by deranged Japanese soldiers. They had seen for themselves how cruelly the Japanese treated the Chinese peasants in the countryside around Shanghai, the casual rapes and executions.

In part they stayed because Shanghai was now their home, where they had made successful lives for themselves away from the Depression-ridden England of the 1930s. Others were missionaries and teachers, who had committed themselves to helping the Chinese people. Together they took for granted that they would be protected by British and American power. Even though Britain was then losing the war against Germany, even after Dunkirk and the fall of France, everyone assumed that the Japanese would be no match for the British Empire and the Royal Navy.

Britain, we knew, possessed the impregnable fortress of Singapore, and a ▶

They took for granted that they would be protected by British and American power. Japanese pilots had bad eyesight and wore glasses, and their gimcrack planes would be no match for the Spitfires and Hurricanes. ☞

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► huge battle-fleet. Japanese pilots had bad eyesight and wore glasses, and their gimcrack planes would be no match for the Spitfires and Hurricanes. Over their drinks at the Country Club people boasted that the war against Japan would be over in weeks, or a month at the outside.

These arrogant assumptions were put to the test on December 7 1941, when the Japanese carrier planes attacked Pearl Harbor. In Shanghai, across the International Date Line, it was already Monday, December 8.

I was lying in bed, reading my Bible in preparation for that morning's scripture exam, when I heard tanks clanking down Amherst Avenue as the Japanese began their seizure of the International Settlement.

My father and mother raced around the house in a panic, followed by the chattering and excited servants. I watched them fling clothes into suitcases. Fearful of the Reverend Matthews, the martinet who was my headmaster, I pleaded to be driven to school, but my father silenced me with the most wonderful words a child can hear: 'Jamie, there'll be no more school and no more exams, not for a very long time.'

Already I was beginning to think that the war might be a good thing.

The Japanese took control of the International Settlement, and the uneasy peace of military occupation followed. A few Britons in senior administrative posts were hunted down and imprisoned, but the thousands of British and European residents were left to themselves, their morale shattered

by the sinking of the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales*, two huge battleships sent north from Singapore without air cover.

The little men squinting through their glasses proved to be brilliant torpedo-bomber pilots. Hong Kong soon fell, and the Singapore garrison surrendered even though it outnumbered the Japanese forces by three to one. So was nailed down the coffin of the British Empire, though the corpse was the only one not to know it was dead, and continued to kick for too many years to come.

The myth of European invincibility had died, something that an eleven-year-old brought up on G.A. Henry and tales of derring-do on the north-west frontier found hard to accept. The British Empire was based on bluff, in many ways a brilliant one, but that bluff had been called.

Throughout 1942 life in Shanghai gradually wound itself down. Cars were confiscated, and my father cycled to his office. Allied nationals were numbered armbands. British companies still carried on their business, but the directors worked in tandem with Japanese supervisors. The time of parties was over. Having outgrown my bicycle, I rollerskated to school, which to my annoyance had reopened, as if the Reverend Matthews was unaware that the war had begun.

Meanwhile the Japanese were constructing a network of internment camps around Shanghai for the British, Dutch and Belgian civilians. In the early months of 1943 came the Ballard family's turn. Our staging post ►

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► was the Columbia Country Club in the Great Western Road, and I remember it crammed with people and their suitcases, many of the women in fur coats, sitting like refugees around the swimming pool. Soon we were driven away to the coming years of captivity, and so, in many ways, began my real life.

Lunghua Camp, in the open countryside to the south of Shanghai, occupied the site of a Chinese teacher-training college.

Classrooms became dormitories, wooden barrack huts housed the unmarried women, and the staff bungalows served as the quarters for the guards and commandant.

The Lunghua district, with its countless creeks and canals, was notorious as a mosquito-infested area, and soon the first cases of malaria broke out. In the humid summer heat everyone moved in a dull, sweaty daze. Our food, for the first year, consisted of grey sweet potatoes, boiled rice, a coarse brown bread and occasional dice-sized pieces of gristly meat. Rooms and corridors were a jumble of suitcases and trunks, and sheets hanging over lines of string soon converted the open dormitories into a maze of tiny cubicles. Once the 2000 internees had settled in, life in Lunghua was dominated by the overheated summers and freezing winters, by stench, noise and boredom.

I was enthralled. Like most British children in pre-war Shanghai, I had met few adult males other than my father's friends. Within a few weeks, as I roamed around the camp, chess set under my arm, I was soon on

good terms with dozens of men. Architects, lawyers, engineers and plant managers, they were bored enough to play a game of chess and dispense a little cynical wisdom to an impressionable young ear.

As a family of four, the Ballards were assigned one of the forty small rooms in G block, so cramped that during the day my father propped his mattress against the wall and set up a card-table from which we could eat our meals. I had been brought up by servants and was fascinated to find myself living, eating and sleeping within an arm's reach of my parents, like the impoverished Chinese families I had seen during my cycle rides around the Shanghai slums.

But my parents must have found their talkative and hyperactive son an immense trial, and were glad to see me anywhere other than their poky room. I roved around the camp, sitting in on bridge and poker games, curious to know how people were adapting to internment. Many of the British in Shanghai had been intoxicated for years, moving through the day from office to lunch to dinner and nightclub in a haze of dry martinis. Sober for the first time, they lost weight and began to read, rekindled old interests and organized drama societies and lecture evenings.

In retrospect, I realize that internment helped people to discover unknown sides to themselves. They conserved their emotions, and kept a careful inventory of hopes and feelings. I often found that taciturn or quick-tempered people could be surprisingly generous, and that some of the ►

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► missionaries who had devoted their lives to the Chinese peasantry could show a curious strain of selfishness.

A few chronic idlers refused to work, but most people buckled down to their assigned tasks. The internees ran the camp, cooking the rations and maintaining the septic tanks and water supply. A school opened for the children, a blessed relief for their parents and a valuable punitive weapon for the Japanese. After an escape attempt or any infringement of the rules they would close the school and impose a day-long curfew, forcing the parents to cope with their bored and restless offspring.

Still intrigued by the Japanese, I soon met some of the guards. Hanging around their bungalows, I realized that they were also imprisoned in Lunghua. The younger soldiers invited me into their bare and unfurnished rooms. They strapped me into their kendo armour and taught me to fence, a whirl of wooden swords that usually sent me back to G block dazed, head ringing from a dozen blows.

They were friendly to me while the war went well for Japan, but when the tide turned after the Battle of Midway conditions in the camp began to worsen. Winters in the unheated cement buildings seemed arctic. A few Red Cross supplies arrived, overalls and shoes with soles cut from motor-car tyres. Our rations fell. The rice and cracked wheat, an animal feedstuff I found especially tasty, were little more than warehouse sweepings, filled with nails and dead insects. We pushed hundreds of weevils to the edges of our

plates, until my father decreed that we needed the protein and would henceforth eat the weevils.

He and I tended a small garden plot, hoisting buckets of excrement from the G block septic tank to fertilize the beds. All over the camp cucumber frames rose from the carefully tilled soil. Tomatoes and melons supplemented our diet, but by 1944 I had long forgotten the taste of meat, milk, butter and sugar.

By the last year of the war I was aware of a certain estrangement between my parents and myself. We had seen too much of each other, and they had none of the levers that parents can pull, no presents to give, no treats to withhold. Lunghua camp was a huge slum, and as in all slums the teenage boys ran wild. I sympathize now with the parents in English sink-estates who are criticized for failing to control their children.

Our rations continued to fall, and the American bombing raids on the Japanese airfield next to the camp provoked the guards into senseless acts of brutality. Mr Hyashi, a former diplomat who was the camp commandant, was no longer able to control the soldiers. But he was a decent man, and after the war my father flew down to Hong Kong and testified in his defence at the war crimes trials. Justly, Hyashi was acquitted.

VJ Day, everywhere else in the world, lasted for twenty-four hours, but in the countryside around Lunghua it seemed to go on for days. The war-clocks had stopped. At last the first American warships moored ►

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◀ opposite the Bund, and their forces took control of Shanghai. The city swiftly became its old self, its bars and brothels eager for business. Gangs of whores roamed the streets in the backs of pedicabs, chasing the American servicemen in their jeeps.

The Ballard family left Lunghua a week after the ceasefire, but I often returned to the camp, hitching rides from passing American trucks. I still felt that Lunghua was my real home. I had come to puberty there, and developed the beginnings of an adult mind. I had seen adults under stress, a valuable education I would never have received in peacetime Shanghai.

I now knew, as my parents revealed when we returned to Amherst Avenue, of the extreme danger we had faced. They had heard from Hyashi that in the autumn of 1945 the Japanese military intended to close Lunghua and march us up-country. There, far from the European neutrals in Shanghai, they would have killed us before preparing to face the expected American landings at the mouth of the Yangtze.

American power had saved our lives, above all the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Not only our lives had been spared, but those of millions of Asian civilians and, just as likely, millions of Japanese in the home islands. I find wholly baffling the widespread belief today that the dropping of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs was an immoral act, even possibly a war crime to rank with Nazi genocide.

During their long advance across the Pacific, the American armies liberated only

one large capital city, Manila. A month of ferocious fighting left 6000 Americans dead, 20,000 Japanese and over 100,000 Filipinos, many of them senselessly slaughtered, a total greater than those who died at Hiroshima.

How many more would have died if the Americans and British had been forced to fight for Singapore, Saigon, Hong Kong and Shanghai? Huge Japanese armies were falling back to the mouth of the Yangtze and would have turned Shanghai into a vast death-ground. The human costs of invading Japan became clear during the fierce struggle for Okinawa, an island close to Japan, when nearly 200,000 Japanese were killed, most of them civilians.

Some historians claim that the war was virtually over, and that the Japanese leaders, seeing their wasted cities and the total collapse of the country's infrastructure, would have surrendered without the atom-bomb attacks. But this ignores one all-important factor – the Japanese soldier. Countless times he had shown that as long as he had a rifle or a grenade he would fight to the end. The only infrastructure the Japanese infantryman needed was his own courage, and there is no reason to believe that he would have fought less tenaciously for his homeland than for a coral atoll thousands of miles away.

The claims that Hiroshima and Nagasaki constitute an American war crime have had an unfortunate effect on the Japanese, confirming their belief that they were the victims of the war rather than the aggressors. As a nation the Japanese have never faced ▶

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► up to the atrocities they committed, and are unlikely to do so as long as we bend our heads in shame before the memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The argument that atomic weapons, by virtue of the genetic damage they cause to the future generations, belong to a special category of evil, seems to me to be equally misguided. The genetic consequences of a rifle bullet through the heart are even more catastrophic, for the victim's genes go nowhere except the grave and his descendants are not even born.

In 1992, nearly fifty years after entering Lungghua camp, I returned for the first time. To my surprise, everything was as I remembered it, though the barrack huts had gone, and the former camp was now a Chinese high school. The children were on holiday, and I was able to visit my old room. Standing between the bunks, I knew that this was where I had been happiest and most at home, despite being a prisoner living under the threat of an early death.

But to survive war, especially as a civilian, one needs to accept the rules it imposes and even, as I did, learn to welcome it.

This article first appeared in the Sunday Times in 1995. ■

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