

Surviving: The Story of Mary Heng

By: Samuel J. Burris

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Many Singaporeans endured shocking hardships during the Japanese invasion and occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945. One of those people is Mary Heng Leong. Mary shared her story with me during several evening chats during my visit to Singapore in March, 1997. I was staying at her home at the time. Following is her tale:

I'm not sure when I was born. It is because of the Japanese invasion of Singapore that I'm not sure where my birth took place.

When the airplanes attacked Singapore that day in 1942, my family was living in Kim Keat Road. Along with myself and my parents, there were two sisters and a brother. My father, Heng Weng Chua was a shop keeper. I was very young at that time so I do not remember my mother's name. I just called her "Amah".

We lived in Jalan Besar where my dad's shop was located. I was the oldest child and helped take care of my younger siblings, brother Kim Soon and my sisters Im Nan and Kim Chui who was the youngest.

We did not know that the Japanese were going to attack and it happened all of a sudden. The planes attacked during our evening meal. My family was visiting my aunt who lived in an attap house in Toa Payoh. When they attacked, a bomb scored a hit upon the house. We had all been sitting around in a circle having dinner and all of a sudden everything exploded. This resulted in my parents, brother and two sisters being killed outright. I survived physically unhurt and ran away along with my aunt. We just kept running and hiding, going into the forest and moving from place to place. The Toa Payoh area of Singapore is in the east central part of the island and there were many rubber plantations there at the time. I was about 7 years old when the attack took place.

Eventually, after the Japanese attack was over and the British had surrendered, my aunt and I went back to Kim Keat Road where I lived with her and my two cousins in another attap house. I never again went back where my family had lived or to the site of my dad's shop. Later my aunt returned to the shop but she told me that other people had taken it over. During all the confusion, my papers were lost so that I had no documents, no photos of my family and I was without any reminders of my past life.

After the attack I lived with my aunt and worked taking care of ducks and farm animals. It was a very hard time for us and we didn't have much food, only tapioca and sometimes a few grains of rice. Often we had to stand in long lines to get food. The new Japanese currency was worth less and less until finally, by 1945, it wasn't worth anything at all. All during the occupation, I didn't see any whites, but I did see some Japanese.

They had swords and many of the Chinese women cut their hair so they would look like a man, thus avoiding being attacked and raped by the soldiers. There was a genuine fear that the Japanese might rape the women.

During the Japanese occupation, there were no shoes available and the clothes we wore had to be repaired over and over. People were pale and there was a lot of malnutrition. I was weak and sick most of the time with my feet very swollen and I couldn't walk. I sat on the road until finally my aunt came and carried me back to the house. ~~I had stay~~ ^{stay} there for awhile, ^{but} I was placed at Tan Tock Sing Hospital. After a time I recovered and was released.

Finally the hard period of the war and occupation ended with the Japanese surrender to the British, ~~four~~ ^{four} long, hard years were over. The Japanese had tried to make Singapore a colony and called it "Syonan". Schools taught the Japanese language and many thousands of people were mistreated and killed by the soldiers so Singaporeans were happy to see the Japanese soldiers leave.

After the surrender, my aunt could no longer afford to keep me with her family so she sold me to a Chinese family named Lim*. They lived on Selegie Road in a shop house. Mr. Lim sold clothing in his shop downstairs and his family lived upstairs. As for my aunt after she took the sale money from Mr. Lim, I never saw her again.

Living with the Lim's was not a happy time for me because I was abused severely by Mr. Lim. I was 12 years old and was forced to work 7 days a week with no days off for almost 3 years. If I did something wrong, made a mistake or Mr. Lim just didn't like something I did, he would hit me with a big stick until I was black and blue on my back. He also hit me on the back of the head with the stick until the skin broke and bled. Those scars are still with me today. Although the wife and children of Mr. Lim witnessed the beatings, they didn't raise a hand to help me. Other people didn't know about the beatings because they always took place upstairs in the shop house. Sometimes after the beatings, Mr. Lim would put coffee powder on the wounds to stop the bleeding.

It was on one of the market days that I had a chance to escape. One of the ladies selling vegetables realized my state and advised me to go to the Social Welfare Department and report ~~about~~ ^{to the authority} Mr. Lim. That is exactly what I did. As a result, I never returned to the Lim family and never saw them again.

After spending a period of time at Social Services, the staff helped me to get a job as a live-in maid with an Indian family named Shah*. I ended up working for them for 5 years. The Shah family set up a special cot for me in their kitchen. ~~For~~
*not their real names

3 years I never had a day off, not even weekends or holidays. Every day I was up at 7:00^{AM} and slept at 10:00^{PM}. My job was to help take care of the children and clean as well as cook. The family paid me about \$50.00 per month but at least I had a place to stay with food and was not abused. Still, I was always frightened that Mr. Lim would find me and take me back to live with them again, but thankfully this never happened.

The Shah family had 4 children and the family taught me to cook Indian style. I was well treated by them and was not abused. One day in the market I met an Indian man I always saw there. He told me of a job available at the medical center in Tanglin. I applied and was offered the job so I moved away from the Shah home and rented a room of my own. This was a great event as it meant the gaining of my freedom at last! My new job meant I cleaned the facilities at the clinic during the week and had weekends and holidays off. What a blessing for me!

The clinic was run by British doctors and staff. I liked it so much there that I worked at the clinic for over 10 years until transferring to the British Military Hospital (BMH) where I worked as a ward assistant.

I was able to be promoted to the new job as a ward assistant because I had gone to night school. I studied and graduated with a degree in Home Nursing in August, 1960. This meant I was able to help take care of patients at the hospital instead of cleaning floors. I loved the job there and stayed for 7 years. There were many things for the staff such as contests and weekend activities. I even got an award for finishing the 15 mile walk with the St. John's Ambulance Brigade! My work as a home nurse was on shift so that sometimes I would have day work and sometimes night. I did continue to take courses, especially to improve my English. This helped me a great deal in my work and in communicating with others using the English language.

It was during my days working at the British Military Hospital that I met Leong Chee Kwong at a party. The occasion was a New Year's Eve party at the home of one of my Chinese friends named Jenny. She introduced me to Leong. For a time we ran around with friends in groups attending movies, going fishing or doing other activities. Leong's father was a goldsmith and his mom a housewife. After dating for 2 years, we were married on December 31, 1965 in a civil ceremony with my sister and brother in laws as witnesses. After the wedding we went on our honeymoon to Kuala Lumpur, driving up in Leong's car and staying for a week. This was the first time I had ever left the island of Singapore and I was very excited!

After our return to Singapore, Leong began working as an electrical inspector for the Singapore government. At first we rented a flat in the Tanglin Halt area and lived there for about 3 years. I continued to work as a ward assistant until

becoming pregnant with my first child, Andrew, born on January 3, 1967.

My husband traveled around the island quite a bit in his own car as part of his job with the government. In 1968, we had an opportunity to buy a newly built duplex free-hold in Tanah Merah near Bedok South and moved there after papers were signed.

During this time I continued working at my job even though a second child, Bernard was born on April 6, 1968. My routine was to drop the two boys off at a nanny at Bukit Ho See on Monday and pick them up and bring them home on Friday although I went to see them every evening during the week. The Wong family also had one son of their own. Even after the boys began school, they still went to stay at the Wong house.

On October 9, 1970, my third child Chris was born. It was about this time that Leong and I were able to borrow money from a bank and purchase our second property on River Valley Road. It was a private apartment and now the nanny was caring for all three boys. Leong had a chance to go to London to study and be paid by the government in 1970, but he was unable to take advantage due to family commitments with us in Singapore. These were times of working every day and all year long with no real holidays.

My fourth son David was born on May 10, 1972 so now we had 4 sons staying with the nanny. Although family gatherings were held with Leong's family, most of our life was now centered around the family.

An opportunity to buy our third property just up the street from us on Jalan Limau Manis occurred during this period, but we had to borrow S\$160,000.00 to do so. Since then, these properties have all been rented out for many years to various tenants.

Singapore in 1965 had become an independent country, splitting from the Malay States. Leong was doing well with his job at the P.U.B. and our lives seemed secure. Two years after David's birth I stopped working at my old job and became a full-time housewife. Being a wife and mother provided lots of activity for me as my children were involved actively in different sports and extracurricular activities.

It was at this time, in 1979, that Leong went on a holiday with a friend of his to Thailand. However when he returned from the trip he didn't feel well and complained of an "ulcer". Leong went to several doctors and specialist but had a hard time finding out what was wrong until he went to the Laguna Clinic and Dr. Leau diagnosed cancer of the liver. He was referred to Alexandra Hospital and had surgery and treatments. Leong suffered a few months, lost lots of weight and finally died on August 10, 1982. A Christian funeral was held at St. Joseph's

Catholic Church in Bras Basah Road and he was cremated. Leong's ashes were buried at Aljuneid.

The loss of Leong was great for the whole family but especially for me. When Leong was alive, he did everything for the family, but when he died, I was forced to take on the full burden of raising 4 teenage boys. Leong's last words to me were to "be brave".

I managed since then with difficulty at times, but mostly with great success, to raise my sons. All 4 of them have completed their national service and graduated from Universities in Singapore, Australia or the United States.

Currently, I still work full time and manage the investment properties Leong and I had purchased many years ago. These properties have all been paid for which makes it much easier for myself and the boys.

I am happy now that my boys have grown and have worked to get their education. My goal now is to continue to live in the house on Jalan Limau Manis. I want to take piano lessons and to travel when I have the chance. It has been quite a journey for me from that shop on Kim Keat Road.

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