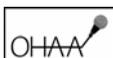


The public forum with veterans and the wartime generation held at Singapore in 2005

Kevin Blackburn



This paper describes the proceedings of a public forum concerned with the Japanese Occupation of Singapore in World War II, where, among historians and some now-prominent veterans of the time, some fascinating recollections were contributed by other veterans who were representative of many whose voices were generally either forgotten or marginalised in mainstream historical narrative. Further, it arises from considerations of reminiscence therapy, and how stories being recorded in this process, as well as contributing to psychological therapy benefits, can be the basis of more public dissemination which not only consolidates feelings of self-worth, but contributes to greater appreciation in the wider community of the past roles of older people. It offers interesting reflections on the relationship between reminiscence therapy, the work of oral historians and processes in the construction of public perceptions of historical events.

In September 2005, to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II in the Asia-Pacific, an event was organised at the Singapore History Museum called, 'An Open Public Forum with Veterans and Members of the Wartime Generation'. The forum was incorporated into an international academic conference, 'The Japanese Occupation: Sixty Years After the End of the Asia-Pacific War Conference', at which historians mingled with members of the wartime generation. At the public forum, alongside Australian, British, American, and Japanese veterans of World War II, who usually take prominence in the narratives of the war experience presented in print or the electronic media, were Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian speakers. Their stories were less well-known, but were also aired at the public forum.

Making public events out of private memories

Creating a public forum on wartime experiences that included some of the voices of those who have been marginalised in national narratives of the war, such as Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Eurasians, was an idea drawn from the theoretical work that has arisen in the last few decades on reminiscence therapy. The concept of staging a public event in which individuals whose memories have been marginalised are expressed, usually as either a play or re-enactment, is found in handbooks and case studies of reminiscence work with older people.¹ The public event is the last part of the process in which the older people are encouraged to tell their life stories, and through this process they gain a greater sense of self-esteem and self-worth in a society which normally tends to devalue the experiences of older people. After their memories are recorded through reminiscence sessions, they are fashioned into a story or narrative that can be told to the public. This play, or re-enactment, is attended by younger generations of the community who, through enjoying the play as an aesthetic experience, come to understand more about the elderly of their community and leave the theatre valuing the ex-

periences of the older people. Sometimes the members of the audience come away from the experience regarding the older people as their community's 'living treasures' or 'living heritage'.²

There are other public events, apart from theatrical performance, in which marginalised memories can be expressed. A familiar form is the public workshop in which the older people tell parts of their life stories around a common theme.³ One of the possible outcomes of these workshops is that older people can sometimes be invited onto a local community radio station to discuss their reminiscences. Kua Ee Heok, Head of the Department of Psychological Medicine at the National University of Singapore and Director of Singapore's Institute of Mental Health and Woodbridge Hospital, in his work with the elderly, envisaged this as a therapeutically beneficial outcome of reminiscence sessions. In his hypothetical account of reminiscence therapy in Singapore based on his own experiences of working with elderly people, Kua outlines how this type of 'forum' over the radio airwaves would work.⁴

In Singapore, until September 2005 there had not been a public forum for the wartime generation to speak to the community, particularly one with the voices that had been marginalised. However, Kua's hypothetical speculations based on reminiscence work he had done with the elderly in Singapore offered oral historians engaged in reminiscence work at Singapore's National Institute of Education, such as myself, hope that bringing reminiscences into the public light at a forum would be beneficial from the perspective of psychological therapy and from the view of oral historians.⁵ The event would benefit those who had been marginalised and undervalued, and it would make good oral history by shedding light on individual memories that did not feature in existing narratives of the war experiences in World War II in the Asia-Pacific, or in the national narrative of Singapore's past.

The Search for the Format for a Public Forum of Reminiscences in Singapore

The occasion for a forum to introduce some of these 'forgotten' stories into the mainstream was Singapore's commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the World War II in the Asia-Pacific, to be held during the first week of September 2005. This week fell during the Singapore school holidays and was also the week earmarked by the Singapore Tourism Board as the time to promote Singapore as a centre of war tourism. Having the forum in the school holidays meant that teachers and school students could attend, and the event would be intergenerational. The Singapore Tourism Board wanted to encourage foreign veterans and their families, as well as tourists interested in World War II, to visit Singapore. According to its media release in February 2005, the Singapore Tourism Board estimated that 5,000 foreign visitors would come to Singapore to visit war heritage sites and participate in commemorative events. Media coverage of war remembrance-related events would be high in what some of Singapore Tourism Board staff described as Singapore's 'World War II Week'.⁶ The Singapore Tourism Board agreed to help fund the proposed forum in order that foreign veterans could speak and give their perspectives. This no doubt helped tourism, but it also meant the forum would be given greater publicity than if only members of Singapore's wartime generation were speaking about their memories. The marginalised voices would be heard beside those that were less so. Thus, it was the right time to introduce to younger generations the stories of the lives of the Singaporean and Malaysian wartime generation rather than just those usually provided from the stories of Western veterans.

The format that this public outcome of recording the reminiscences of the wartime generation took was influenced by the visit of Professor Hank Nelson, of the Australian National University, to Singapore in September 2004. He gave a seminar at Singapore's National Institute of Education on his own work. In August 1991, Hank Nelson and Gavan McCormack, both of the Australian National University, organised a symposium in Canberra on the Burma-Thailand Railway which included not just historians, but veterans from both sides of the war. The edited book which came out of this event was a best seller that included a rich mixture of chapters written by historians and chapters of personal testimony recalled by the veterans. The idea of a mixture of historians and veterans with different perspectives of the war had a strong attraction for myself and other members of the oral history program at Singapore's National Institute of Education.⁷ Michael Frisch highlights how the impression that being present at a historical event, or participating in an historical era, automatically confers interpretative authority upon a narrator is a fallacy. Having one perspective of an event, no matter how close to the event, does not constitute a history, because the testimony has to be placed in context.⁸ Members of the audience would be able to

contextualise what one veteran or member of the war generation was saying rather than accept it on face value as 'the past speaking' to them. Thus, the concept of a public forum became tied to an international conference of historians from around the world who worked on World War II in the Asia-Pacific. This was 'The Japanese Occupation: Sixty Years After the End of the Asia-Pacific War Conference', which we had been also planning.

Summary of the Public Forum with Veterans and Members of the Wartime Generation in Singapore

The first session of the public forum held at the Singapore History Museum on Sunday, 4 September 2005 before a mixed two-hundred-strong audience of historians, teachers, school children, and members of the general public was called 'Defending Singapore and the Start of the War in the Asia-Pacific'. First to speak was an Australian veteran, Don Lee, whose passage to Singapore was assisted by the finance from the Singapore Tourism Board. Don, aged 93, had been a lieutenant in the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion from Western Australia, and was posted near the Causeway between the Malay Peninsula and Singapore the night the Japanese came across the Johor Strait there on 9 February 1942. After the fall of Singapore, he was imprisoned at Changi, and then sent to the Burma-Thailand Railway. Don's testimony revealed that among the wartime generation in Singapore and Australia many only hold the wartime militarists of Japan responsible for the war, not younger Japanese generations. When I mentioned that Japanese would be attending the public forum, he said: 'I bear no animosity to the younger Japanese, only towards their Samurai-indoctrinated grandfathers.'

After his talk in the public forum, in interviews I had with Don during the academic conference, in contrast to his address, he was very reflective about how some of his comrades died a lingering painful death as prisoners or war, while those who died in battle and experienced pain for a short period were considered as having died for their country. Don asked, 'What does dying for your country mean? I saw men who were just decomposing. Is it fair to say that they did not die for their country?' He gave an account of how one of these men was 'slumped against a tree decomposing', but still was able to have a joke in a cheerful manner, 'I only have a week to go, you know.' He never uttered a word of resentment against the Japanese people. He was reflective about deprivation, heroism and death, not Japan.

The other two speakers in the same session were local veterans from Singapore and neighbouring Malaysia whose experiences were marginalised and forgotten, but whom I had interviewed privately a few times over several years.

After Don Lee, the next speaker in the session was Choi Siew Hong, aged 83. As a young Raffles College student, he and his two friends answered a newspaper advertisement in the Singapore *Straits Times* in January 1942 for volunteers to join a Chinese unit, called



The young Mrs F. R. Bhupalan as a 16-year-old soldier.

Dalforce, to fight along side the British, Australians and Indians in the defence of Singapore in February 1942. Mr Choi described the fall of Singapore as ‘just one week of my life’ when I had interviewed him. During his public reminiscence about this period in his life, he continued to understate his contributions in resisting the Japanese, although participating in the public forum did make him more aware of his role. The third speaker in the session was K.R. Das, aged 87, who was a warrant officer in the British Indian Army. His experiences had been marginalised and forgotten in war narratives as both a member of the British Indian Army and the Indian National Army. He arrived in Singapore from Bombay on 2 January 1942 to be posted with his 13th Pioneer Battalion to around the Labis area on the Malay Peninsula, to assist the Australians in holding back the Japanese. During the Japanese Occupation, he joined the Indian National Army, which Indian nationalists created from captured British Indian Army soldiers, to liberate India from the British. It was formed with Japanese assistance and patronage. In the Indian National Army, Das held the rank of lieutenant. He took advantage of the public forum to criticise a trait in its own community to not realise its nationalist aspirations, but to think only of the present and making money. Das even included himself in what became reflective self-analysis when he described his years in the British Indian Army: ‘I joined because of money. I was a mercenary. Indians would fight for any country but their own!’

The second session of the Public Forum, ‘The Japanese Occupation and Captivity’, mostly featured elderly Singaporeans and Malaysians giving their testimonies



Mrs F. R. Bhupalan at 78, still active in teaching and civic NGO activities.

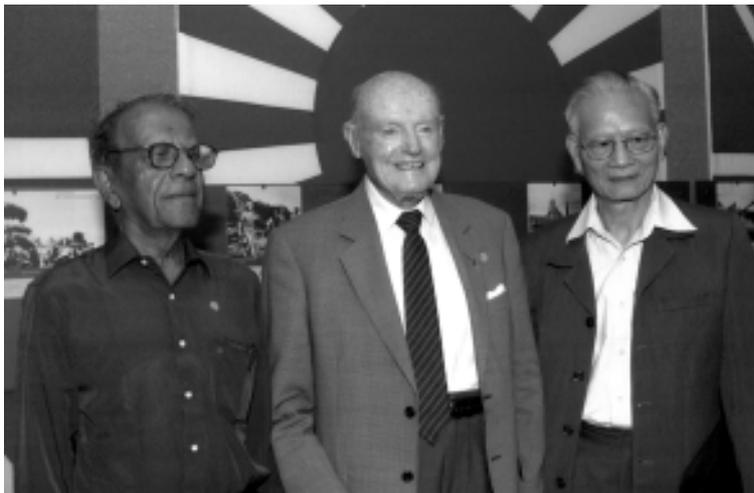
about the Japanese Occupation. Their accounts were stories that did not feature in the mainstream narrative of the war. The first to speak was Mrs F. R. Bhupalan, aged 78, who joined in 1943 the Rani of Jhansi Regiment when she was sixteen, to liberate India from British rule. She went to Burma with the first contingent of this all-women’s regiment. After the war, she became one of Malaysia’s most prominent women’s activists and a leader in the teaching profession. Mrs Bhupalan described in flowing terms the period and sense of empowerment that being a female soldier meant to her.

After Mrs Bhupalan came Eric Paglar, aged 76, a former teenage Eurasian cadet trained by the Japanese military at various military and technical schools. His memories reflected the dilemmas of getting on with life and having to have the goodwill of the Japanese in order to intervene to help others who were in trouble with the Japanese. His father, Dr Charles Paglar, whom the Japanese appointed as leader of the Eurasian community, helped many Singaporeans in difficulties through drawing on his good standing with the Japanese. At the public forum, Eric read out the poignant comments that his father had written in his prayer book when he was alone in gaol during the time he was put on trial for collaboration with the Japanese:

Saviour of my community. Helper of the poor and suffering. Victor of a glorious struggle. Singer of a noble cause. Now inmate of Pearl’s Hill gaol. Such are the honours of my life.

For Eric, the public airing of his reminiscences was a genuinely cathartic experience that was of therapeutic value.

The last speaker of the second session of the forum was Mohd. Anis Tairan, aged 73. He was a young teenage cadet at one of the Japanese military training institutions in Singapore, being educated to go into the Japanese-sponsored local army *Giyu-Gun*. His brother had served in the British Army. In his village at Kampong Siglap in Singapore, he knew members of the Malay nationalist political organisation Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM), who were assisting the Japanese in espionage before the war. In addition to his own story as a student



The reunion of three veterans of surrendered Indian, Australian and Chinese troops at the fall of Singapore in 1942: K. R. Das, Don Lee, and Choi Siew Hong.

learning Japanese martial arts, he told the differing stories of his family members and his fellow villagers at Kampong Siglap to illustrate the varied responses among the Malay community to the Japanese Occupation. For Mr Anis, the varied stories of service to both the British and Japanese amongst his Malay community were not contradictory, as he felt they were serving the interests of the local Malay community, not their imperial masters.

The third and last session for the day was the shortest because the second session had gone well over its allocated time. However, all the speakers in this session were presenting academic papers at 'The Japanese Occupation: Sixty Years After the End of the Asia-Pacific War Conference' in the following two days, whereas the previous speakers would not be doing so. The first speaker, Yoji Akashi, was a Japanese historian for whom the Japanese Occupation is both part of his personal memories (he was born in 1928), as well as the focus of his research. Professor Akashi elected to draw upon many of his interviews with Japanese war veterans and administrators from the Japanese Occupation that he had done over forty years, and give interesting anecdotes rather than discuss his own experiences as part of Japan's wartime generation who had been in Malaysia during the war.

After Akashi was Lin Chao Zong, aged 82, who was a member of the communist-led Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, which was engaged in guerrilla activity in the jungles of Malaysia against the Japanese during the Japanese Occupation. He gave a reflective address on hand-to-hand combat with the Japanese in the jungles of Malaysia, and the value of resistance versus collaboration. Mr Lin was followed by another person who would also speak on the anti-Japanese resistance panel at the following academic conference, Leon Comber, aged 84. He reminisced, as a member of the returning British forces in 1945, on how the British and captured Japanese prisoners of war saw the end of the conflict.

The last speaker in the third session on the end of the war was also an historian who had personal memories

of the period he researched. This was Professor Grant Goodman, aged 81, who had been an American officer involved in the American Occupation of Japan. He reflected on how he interrogated Japanese prisoners of war and how he saw the Japanese deal with their defeat.

A problem that arose with the public forum was that more than a few of the speakers went well over time. In a discussion with Hank Nelson on why this session proved so long, I expressed my view that perhaps some participants talked for so long because their voices had been marginalised and they were now taking advantage of the opportunity provided. He replied, 'And that is precisely why there should be these forums.' The audience of historians, teachers, school children, and members of the public tended to see it the same way. Questions were directed to the veterans and wartime generation not about what facts they could recall but how they felt about the events of sixty years ago.

The questions and comments from the audience, including historians, that were directed to the speakers did indeed suggest that they valued the experiences of the elderly and that they endorsed the notion of hearing a variety of voices on the past from individuals with different perspectives on the same event. In the following days, when the academic conference began, the veterans and wartime generation would query the historians. Also, several Singapore teachers in the audience, who were working in the Singapore Ministry of Education at the time, later used film footage from the public forum in a documentary for school children on the different experiences of members of the diverse ethnic communities of Singapore through the Japanese Occupation. This theme of differing perspectives was also present in the Singapore television documentary, *Remembering Syonan-to*, broadcast on 10 September 2005, which did interviews with the very same Singapore veterans featured in the public forum, as well as several other members of the wartime generation who had been interviewed by oral historians at the National Institute of Education, but had declined to give an address to a large audience at the public forum.

NOTES

- ¹ See for example, Caroline Osborn, *The Reminiscence Handbook*, London: Age Exchange, The Reminiscence Centre, 1993; Faith Gibson, *Reminiscence and Recall: A guide to good practice*, 2nd edition, London: Age Concern, 1998; and Joanna Bornat (ed), *Reminiscence Reviewed: Evaluations, Achievements, Perspectives*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994).
- ² Perlstein, Susan, 'Transformation: Life Review and Communal Theater', in *Journal of Gerontological Social Work: Twenty-Five Years of Life Review: Theoretical and Practical Considerations*, vol. 12, nos. 3 & 4, 1988, pp.137-148; Pam Schweiter, 'Dramatizing Reminiscences', in Joanna Bornat, (ed.) *Reminiscence Reviewed*, (ibid.) pp.105-115; and Pam Schweitzer, *Age Exchanges: Reminiscence Projects for Children and Older People*, London, Age Exchange, 1993.
- ³ See for example, Kaminsky, Marc, 'All That Our Eyes Have Witnessed: Memories of a Living History Workshop in the South Bronx', *Journal of Gerontological Social Work: Twenty-Five Years of Life Review: Theoretical and Practical Considerations*, vol. 12, nos. 3 & 4, 1988, pp.101-110.
- ⁴ Kua Ee Heok, *Listening to Letter from America*, Singapore, SNP, 2000.
- ⁵ Blackburn, Kevin, 'Reminiscence and War Trauma: Recalling the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942-1945)', in *Oral History*, vol. 33, no. 2, Autumn 2005, pp.101-110.
- ⁶ *Singapore Remembers the End of World War II in the Asia-Pacific*, Singapore Tourism Board File for The Press Conference at the BattleBox on 14 February 2005; and press reports in the *Straits Times*, 15 February 2005.
- ⁷ McCormack, Gavan, and Hank Nelson (eds), *The Burma-Thailand Railway: History and Memory*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1993.
- ⁸ Frisch, Michael, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1990, pp.175-177.