



## How we remember

HONOUR:

# Showing respect by capturing survivors' memories

*Over the years, Singaporeans have made many artworks about the Japanese Occupation. Each one reflects the different ideas of the time they were created, and the different emotions of their artists. Amanda Heng, for example, has collected war stories from ordinary Singaporeans as a way of honouring their experiences. NG YI-SHENG tells us more.*



[Photo: MCCY VIDEO]

Like most of us, Amanda Heng's knowledge of the Japanese Occupation came from books, pictures and museum displays. However, there was an important source of information about this period in her own home: her mother, Koh Siang Tian. Madam Koh had been a 16-year-old girl during the time of the war, and had

experienced its horrors. "But, I never really paid attention to her stories," says Ms Heng, who works as an artist.

Ms Heng's mother is not the only one with stories. There are hundreds of Singaporeans like her who have their own memories of the war. Their recollections are an important part of our country's history. They tell us what everyday life was like then and also how Singaporeans learned to survive those difficult times. Sadly, as time goes on, they are being forgotten.

Ms Heng decided to do something about it. In 2005, she created an artwork called *I Remember...*. Her aim was to collect as many personal experiences of the war as possible. Using English, Malay, Mandarin and Chinese dialects, she interviewed about 20 survivors of the Occupation, recording what they remembered about their lives. Her videos were then projected onto a wall near the Esplanade for everyone to see.

Of course, one of the first people she talked to was her mother. As a girl, life was especially difficult for Madam Koh. She and her friends often hid on a small island near Jurong to avoid Japanese soldiers. They would leave their homes early in the morning and row to the island on sampans. They would stay there the whole day, crouched behind bushes and trees, often without any food or water, and return home only after sunset. They were terrified that the soldiers would discover their hideout, or that something might happen to their families while they were away.

But, even during these trying times, people did their best to look at the bright side of things. For instance, another interviewee, Margaret Philips, talked about how the bread she received was usually as hard as rock. Instead of complaining, she amused herself by throwing pieces of it at the wall to see how far it would bounce back. Her mother made the best of the situation by frying the bread and serving it as biscuits.

Ms Heng also came across examples of how not all Japanese soldiers were bad.

Many were just ordinary people who missed their families back in Japan and wanted the war to end. Hedwig Anuar described how one officer used to come regularly to her home to hear her sister play the piano. Later, she discovered that he had a sister of his own who also loved playing the piano. Coming to her house was just his way of reminding himself of his family.

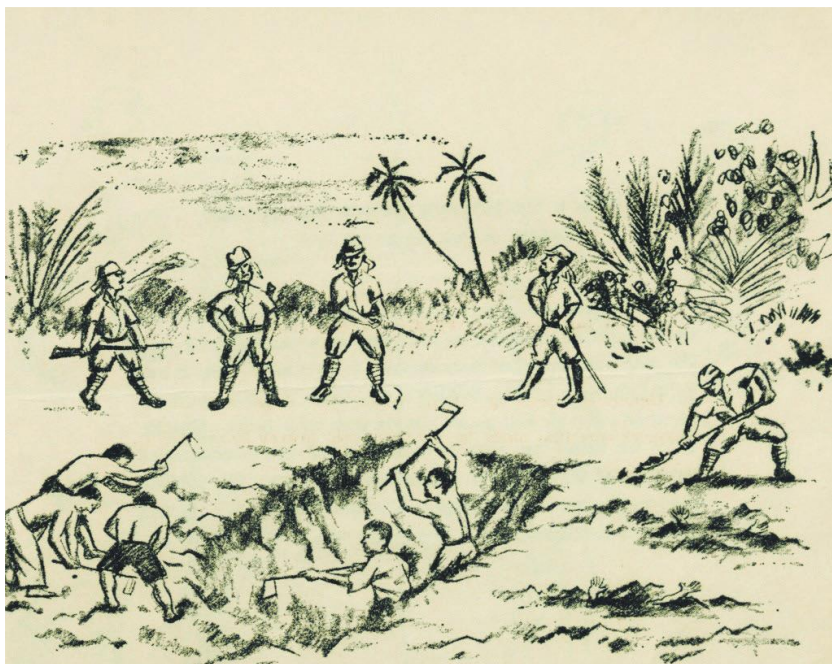
Ultimately, Ms Heng feels that working on *I Remember...* made her look at the Japanese Occupation in a new way. "It is not about who was right or who won the war," she says. Rather, we have to try and understand what made people behave the way they did in that situation. Everyone was trying desperately to stay alive, and many did things that they are still ashamed of.

She believes all Singaporeans should try and ask elderly relatives and friends about their war memories. Their personal stories can make history feel real in a way that textbooks cannot. We can pass them on to later generations, so that they are never forgotten.



Amanda Heng also created a performance art piece at the end of which she got herself tattooed.  
[Photo: NG YI-SHENG]

## ANGER: SKETCHING HARD TIMES



This sketch from Liu Kang's 'Chop Suey' shows how people were forced to dig their own graves before they were executed.

Liu Kang was one of Singapore's most famous artists. He made beautiful oil paintings, showing the tropical scenery of Southeast Asia.

But, after the Japanese Occupation, he did not feel like drawing anything beautiful. He was furious about the suffering of his people, and he wanted to make sure no-one forgot about it.

He travelled around Singapore, asking ordinary people for their war stories. In 1946, he published these tales in a book called Chop Suey (a Cantonese term meaning “bits and pieces”), accompanied by illustrations. These pictures reveal how the Japanese abused and murdered people cruelly.

Chop Suey was published not only in Mandarin and English, but also in Japanese. Nakahara Michiko, a Japanese professor, translated the words. She wanted to make sure her people never committed such horrible acts again.

## **EMPATHY: THE GUILTY GHOSTS**

By the 1990s, Singapore and Japan had very good relations. Many Singaporeans grew fascinated by Japanese culture. One of them was the playwright Kuo Pao Kun, who was invited to spend four months in Japan developing a new play.

The play he wrote was *The Spirits Play*. Its characters are five Japanese ghosts: a general, a soldier, a nurse, a mother and a poet. All of them died during World War 2. They are stuck in the world of spirits because of their guilt and anger over their actions during the war.

Mr Kuo was trying to understand how a civilised people like the Japanese could have acted so viciously. At one point in the play, the poet says, “How come we have suddenly become so dark and cold, so murderous and cruel?”

The Japanese were not monsters. They were humans like us. Through his play, Mr Kuo was explaining that we are all capable of doing evil. We must never allow ourselves to be as heartless as the people who once invaded our land.

## **PRIDE: MOVIES ABOUT HEROISM**



A scene from *Sergeant Hassan* starring the legendary P. Ramlee.  
[Photo: YOUTUBE]

In 1958, Shaw Brothers released two Malay language movies about World War 2. Matahari tells the tale of a woman who leads an anti- Japanese army in jungle warfare. Sergeant Hassan is about a soldier in the Malay Regimen, a real-life unit that fought against the Japanese invaders.

These movies are about fictional characters. But, they reflect very real issues of the 1950s. Back then, Singapore and Malaysia were fighting for independence.

Some experts believed it would be impossible for the different races to live together in peace. Matahari and Sergeant Hassan had multiracial casts, made up of Malays, Chinese and Indians.

They inspired viewers to feel proud and united, by reminding them of how they had all come together to fight the Japanese.

Interestingly, the directors Ramon A. Estella and Lamberto V. Avellana were not local. They were from the Philippines. But, they understood the issues of the movies well. Their country was also occupied by the Japanese during the war.

## SORROW: A PRINCIPAL'S POEM



Principal Teo Kah Leng at Montfort Primary.  
[Photo: ANNE HAR / ETHOS BOOKS]

Benedict Teo Kah Leng was the Principal of Holy Innocents' English School, which is now known as Montfort Primary School. However, he was not just an educator. He was also a poet. In fact, he wrote the school anthem, which is still sung today.

Throughout his life, Mr Teo was haunted by the memories of the Occupation. His brothers Peter Teo Kee Leng and Paul Teo Poh Leng were killed in the Sook Ching massacre, and his blind mother died two years later. In 1955, he published a long poem in his school's annual magazine, mourning the senseless death of his brothers.

Below is an extract from the poem, which can be found in the book, *I Found A Bone and Other Poems* by Teo Kah Leng, published by Ethos Books in 2016.

### **“I Found a Bone”**

I found a bone on Ponggol Beach  
Half buried in the sand,  
And bleached as white by the sea and  
sun—  
I picked it with my hand.

It was as brittle and as light  
As coral in the sea;  
It had been once an arm like mine,  
And a hope like me.

“But then there came a fateful day  
To shatter hope and faith;  
‘Twas nineteen hundred forty-two,  
February twenty-eighth...

“They strung us each to each in a line,  
Our hands behind us tied,  
And stretched us all along the beach  
To face the rising tide...

“A machine-gun sputtered a deadly  
hate,  
A bullet whizzed through me,  
And I was dragged down by the line  
That dropped before the sea...

“I heard my brother groan and die,  
I heard approaching feet;  
Ah ah! I felt the welcome steel  
That stopped my heart to beat.”

I held the arm bone in my hand,  
And let my warm tears fall.  
My brothers were slain on Ponggol  
Beach,  
My brothers Peter and Paul.

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*Thank you. — News For Kids*