

Captive Fathers, Captive Children

INTRODUCTION

Prisoners of war were not the only captives of World War Two: many of their children also became captives of their fathers' trauma. The Latin origin of the word "captivity" means to "seize or take". The prisoners of war had several years of life seized from them, and some of us here had a number of potentially happy and healthy childhood years snatched away from us because of the effects of our fathers' captivity on our fathers.

In some cases, the fathers' pain and trauma were so great that they spilled over into the family in aggressive and violent ways. For the majority, however, this was not the case, but even then the children often sensed that all was not well in the family

But the word "captive" also evokes the idea of "being captivated", or being enthralled. Whether our childhoods were painful or fulfilling, or some combination of the two, many children of POWs share an enduring fascination with what happened to their fathers. There seems to be something about the nature of POW captivity and its impact on our early years that drives us to want to find out more, to understand more. And so, in that sense, we are also "captives" of our father's histories.

We know a great deal about the hardships suffered by the POWs, but the stories of their children are rarely heard, and poorly understood. The starting point for my research was to ask how the children of former Far East prisoners of war (FEPOWs) remembered their childhoods, and then how they fashioned those memories during adulthood. I was particularly interested in how the children used 'memory practices' to revisit, review and reconstruct their relationships with their fathers.

The term 'memory practice' is applied to any activity that give memories their meaning. This includes official remembrance events, pilgrimages to sites connected with the war, the study of military family history, and remembrance in the home, such as how we curate photographs, mementoes and other artifacts related to being a prisoner of war, as well as online activities such as tribute websites and social media like Facebook.

During my research I conducted 34 face-to-face life story interviews with children of POWs, and a further six by email. These interviews followed the psychosocial

approach as proposed by Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson¹. Interviews lasted between two and three hours, and were in-depth, and unstructured. The psychosocial method is based on “free association narrative” interviews and a holistic analysis, and is informed by psychoanalytic concepts, such as the unconscious mind, and the processes of transference and counter-transference. Using this method, the interviewer tries to stay sensitive to unconscious aspects of the research relationship, which include the interviewers’ own emotional responses and feelings. By tracing life stories in this way, I found that I could examine the more subtle aspects of intergenerational transmission, and show how the memory practices of the children of Far East POWs had their roots in the captivity experiences of their fathers.

One of the main aims of this presentation is to show how trauma flows through and between generations, and how the children used different genres of memory practice to make sense of their own lives. Later on I will illustrate this by describing two families who felt their father’s trauma in very different ways. But first I want to say something about my own family background.

MY FATHER’S WAR STORY

My father was an anti-aircraft gunner in the British Army. He was not a regular soldier but a volunteer who joined the Royal Artillery in September 1939, the same month in which he married my mother. He was captured in Java in February 1942, and spent six months there, before being transported to Japan on a ‘hell ship’. Once in Japan, he was taken to Hiroshima 6B POW camp, about 100km from Hiroshima city, where, for the next three years, he laboured in the coal mines.

He returned to England in November 1945, and continued his career as a sign writer. I was born in 1947, and I am an only child.

Towards the end of the war, the British government established Civil Resettlement Units (CRUs) to help returning European prisoners of war adapt to civilian life. CRUs offered 4-5 week residential programmes that were practical and included social activities and vocational guidance, as well as psychiatric help if necessary. Some 60% of POWs from the European camps attended a CRU. By the autumn of 1945 when the British POWs began to arrive home from Asia, the CRU’s had been judged a success, and so they were made available to the new arrivals. In the end, though, only 12% of Far East POWs attended.²

To make matters worse, the men were told not talk about their experiences, and this

¹ Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2013) *Doing qualitative research differently: a psychosocial approach*, London: Sage Publications Ltd.

² FEPOWs were often in poor physical condition and CRUs were not equipped to meet these needs (Curle 2001, p.3).

was extended to their families who were instructed not to ask questions.

My own father did not attend a CRU because he wanted to get back to work as soon as possible. Although he had been brutalised by his experiences in Java and Japan, and never properly recovered from the trauma, he was not a violent man. After his death, I found small scraps of paper on which he had written short and sometimes angry notes about his time in Japanese hands. These were written while he was an elderly man, only months before his death, and so provided unwelcome evidence of how trauma can persist for a lifetime.

BRINGING WAR INTO THE HOME

Because the ex-POWs rarely spoke about their experiences, their painful memories had to find alternative routes of expression. For their children, the clues to what the father was going through were to be found in behaviour not in words, in their physical appearance, and in their state of health.

The two contrasting case studies that I am going to present will show how trauma was experienced in childhood, and in later life. They also reveal how different memory practices emerged over the life course of participants.

A. **Pete and Brenda ... brother and sister**

Pete

Pete was born in 1948, the third of four children. Now retired, he had been a scientist who'd held senior positions in the oil industry. His father had been a career soldier, a quartermaster sergeant, responsible for stores and supplies, and so was comfortable with detail and the workings of the military bureaucracy. Despite his father's military background, Pete claimed to have no long-standing interest in military history as such. However, early in the interview, he began to describe his father's army career with terrific gusto and fluency. He was one of a group of research participants - that I called the "History Boys" - whose memory practices centred on their relentless search for information about the time their fathers spent as POWs. Gaps in the evidence merely made Pete strive even harder. His meticulous research was driven by a strong sense of pride in his father's actions during the war, which became especially apparent when he described the POW's efforts to sabotage the building of the Thai-Burma railway.

Pete could recall only one way in which his father's POW life had been apparent in his childhood. These were the times when he used to count in Japanese while playing with his children. Aside from this, he was, in Pete's words, 'just an ordinary Dad'. Of

course, this begs the question of how we acquire our sense of what is ‘ordinary’ or ‘normal’.

One distinctive feature of Pete’s research was that he expanded his realm of interest way beyond his father. Remarkably, he tracked all 935 members of his father’s battalion. Towards the end of our interview, he took out the spreadsheets showing the movements of each of these men during the war. Laid out end-to-end, they stretched halfway across his large living room.

Brenda

My interviews with Pete and Brenda were very different, both in content and in the emotional energy they generated. Pete was very confident and ‘in control’, whereas Brenda was much quieter, very tentative and reluctant to venture any opinion. In fact, overall, my interview with her was a stumbling affair during which she was politely guarded, and quite anxious. She answered my open ended questions with brief responses only, and so I found myself having to shape the interview more than I would have liked.

But what made Brenda’s interview stand out in my mind was that she described one significant feature of her father’s behaviour that Pete did not mention at all, or even hinted at. She recalled that when she was a child her father needed periods ‘away’ from the family, separating himself from them both physically and emotionally. Brenda described these episodes very hesitantly. Gradually, she began to reveal more about her father’s behaviour. This is how she put it in her own words:

... he’d sit for hours, pondering. I don’t know what was wrong ... if he had some days off, he’d just sit in the front room. And he wouldn’t come and join us or anything. And I think he was probably relating back to what happened in the war. I mean, I never knew if he suffered. He obviously did suffer because mum said when he came back he wasn’t the same person she married. But, of course, in those days when you marry someone, you stay with them, don’t you? ...

I asked her how long these quiet moods lasted. She said:

Two or three days, maybe. She cooked him his dinners, she took them into him, and he wouldn’t eat them. And when she went to bed, he’d come out. He’d come out into the kitchen and make himself a jam sandwich. She knew that because he didn’t clear up after himself [laughs] ... I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but still ... but never mind. It was one of those things. ...

Although Brenda expressed herself in muted and mundane terms, she succeeded in

depicting the impact her father's behaviour had had on her as a child. By making himself 'absent' in this way, he had established a powerful, yet paradoxical 'presence' in his daughter's mind. Her final comment 'It was one of those things. ...' seemed like an attempt to put her memories 'back into their box'. And by saying 'I probably shouldn't be telling you these things' she revealed how easy it is for families to feel shame and embarrassment about family members whose behaviour might be seen as a little out of the ordinary.

During my interview with Brenda, I had felt quite uncomfortable at times. I was aware of a 'remoteness' between us, and my sense of frustration when she lapsed into a silence, or slipped into clichés. It was as if both of us had 'gone missing' at times during the interview, as if I was getting a little closer to how she had felt all those years ago.

B. Joanna

Joanna's story highlights the impact of accumulated traumas, both on her father and on herself. The first time she knew anything about her father's war trauma was when she was about seven. She recalled walking into her parents' bedroom. Her father was sobbing. It was the first time she'd seen her father cry, and she didn't understand what was going on ... Her mother explained that her father had been to see some friends who had died - he had visited their graves - and he was very upset.

Her father had had a "long war". When he was seventeen or eighteen her father had joined the Territorial Army. He had been embroiled in the retreat from the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940, then dispatched to the Far East where he became a POW on the Thai-Burma railway. During the war, he rose to the rank of Captain and, after the war, ultimately became a very successful business man. On his return home to Britain, unlike most former FEPOWs, he had spent six weeks in a Civil Resettlement Unit. His ambition had been to become a teacher but this was thwarted when he lost his temper with a pupil while on teaching placement.

Joanna was told by her mother that the first ten years after the war were 'fine' but then his temper got worse. He became more and more volatile, and would lose his temper with Joanna and her brother. As Joanna explained:

You just waited to be, you know, you'd be hit. I got hit m ... more ... more than my brother. Mostly because I was defending my mother. He didn't hit my mother but he would be vile to her, and upset her. I think the last time he hit me I was ... s-s-seven...teen. ... Yeah. ... And so because I was always the one defending my mother, he would lash out at me.

The hesitations in her account reveal the embarrassment and shame of being hit as a

seventeen year old. Joanna normalised the dynamics of her family life as best she could and blamed herself, rather than blaming her father.

The next extract from Joanna's story shows how captivity trauma could be re-enacted in later life, and how an adult child could be drawn into a physical 're-living' of her father's past experience. Joanna described a defining event when she was thirty-eight, and her father seventy years of age. Her mother was sixty-six, and terminally ill. Joanna was staying with her parents to help care for her mother:

At about three thirty in the morning, she sat bolt upright in bed, eyes open. Very distressed. I was terrified. Never seen anybody dying before, let alone my own mother. So, I said to my father, I think mummy is in distress. I don't know what to do. Eventually, he came in and he just said right, he said, I'm going to end this for her now, Joanna. You wouldn't have an animal treated like this. And so he held the button down and morphine just went rushing in.³

He said, go and get a mirror, and hold it in front of her face Joanna, you'll soon tell when she stops breathing. I was left in there with her. I was holding her hand and crying, and beside myself ... It was extraordinary! ... And then he called the undertakers. And I just remember hearing them zip the body bag. I couldn't hear a zip for years after that ... because that was the zipping my mother up.

At seven in the morning, he gave Joanna further 'instructions'. He wanted everything belonging to her mother removed from the house and burned:

He lit a bonfire. He burnt the mattress, he burnt her wigs, he burnt letters, love letters between them, which she'd kept years and years. ... He burnt photos. ... I was then having tugs-of-war at the bonfire with photos and things and trying to get things off him, putting them in the boot of my car.

Sometime later, Joanna was able to reflect on what had happened that day. She came to the conclusion that her father had been reenacting behaviours learned in the camps because, as she put it, 'when they had cholera, they had to burn their bodies. So, the first thing they would do would be light a bonfire'.

Under considerable duress, Joanna had become a participant in what two French psychoanalysts - Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière⁴ - call a 'traumatic

³ Her mother was receiving morphine via a syringe driver.

⁴ Chapter 5 - 'The psychoanalysis of psychosis at the crossroads of individual stories and history', in Laub and Hamburger (eds) (2017) *Psychoanalysis and Holocaust Testimony: Unwanted Memories of Social Trauma*, Routledge.

revival' derived from the buried memories of the father's accumulated trauma; trauma that he had been unable to process properly in earlier years. His personal past had exploded into their shared present, and for a few hours his psyche was dominated by his horrific experiences in the POW camps on the Thai-Burma railway. Her father had dragged Joanna into his disturbed psychic world, controlling her actions, and once again treating her as a frightened child.

The final part of Joanna's describes how she began to come to terms with memories of her father.

Joanna and a friend - whose father had also been a Japanese prisoner of war - wanted to lay some ghosts to rest. They decided to visit Singapore where both of their fathers had been captured. Their hotel was an old colonial building, set in the middle of a national park. In the week they were there, the hotel was doing tree planting, for anyone who wanted to plant a tree in remembrance of someone. Joanna and her friend couldn't resist it. This is how she described what happened:

They chose trees that were endangered species like our fathers. They will be the tallest trees in the park, so they said, it will be like your fathers are overlooking the whole of Singapore. They're very hardy, as obviously our fathers were ... I found it really quite spooky. I did feel that my father was somehow lurking ... And also, I suppose, because it was only two years since I put his ashes into my mother's grave. ... And I was in there planting this tree, and it was earth again, you know, it was all sort of, I'm back down ... grave digging again. I just thought, yes, he really would be proud of this.

We can infer that the tree represented her ideal father, devoid of flaws: tall, upright, reliable, hardy, and commanding ... yet unthreatening. By the end of her pilgrimage, Joanna felt she had achieved the validation and emotional response from her father that she had yearned for as a child. Joanna was able to reflect on her life, and, in her internal world, succeeded in establishing an acceptance and understanding of her father that would not have been predicted from her difficult life history.

I'd like to conclude with some personal thoughts on reconciliation.

ROUTES TO RECONCILIATION

In 2010 and 2014, my wife and I joined small pilgrimage groups travelling from the UK to Japan. During these visits, we were able to experience, at first hand, a range of reconciliation activities. Now, to conclude, I'd like to share a few of these experiences, and what I felt I learned about reconciliation.

Reconciliation is about change. And visits to the sites of war trauma are one way of

beginning the process of change. Kyoko Murakami, an Associate Professor in Psychology, in the University of Copenhagen is one very few academics to have written about Anglo-Japanese pilgrimages. She refers to the way in which:

Silence and contemplation in heritage sites ... offer visitors opportunities to unsettle meanings, to glean multiple perspectives, and to produce interpretations and counter narratives arising from emotional responses provoked by the encounter. (Kyoko Murakami 2018).

Pilgrimage provides participants with planned, and many more unplanned, opportunities to engage in thoughtful reflection, taking place as a meditation on the border between conscious and unconscious thought. These are individual experiences, but induced by the interactions between the external world and interior psychic states. Japan is the one location where relatives of Far East POWs are guaranteed to be brought face to face with descendants of former enemies. This exposure and the internal process of reflection can uncover conflicts and contradictions, and challenge our existing ideas, attitudes and prejudices - necessary preconditions for reconciliation to take place.

The ‘unsettling’ experiences mentioned by Murakami may occur unexpectedly, and often in the most mundane circumstances, such as during rail travel. There is something about the rhythmic, visceral nature of a train journey that induces contemplation and the mental state often referred to as reverie.

With so many pilgrimage sites well off the beaten track, located in rural areas that few foreign tourists choose to visit, pilgrims soon find themselves immersed in local culture. While I gazed out of the window of the Hiroshima to Onomichi bullet train, fantasy quickly took over, and I sank into a reverie that stripped away the gloss of contemporary Japanese life to reveal images of past events, coloured by some of the conversations I had held with my father. As the countryside rushed by, I realised that I was seeing physical and social landscapes, and aspects of Japanese culture, that my father might have recognized from seventy years ago. The fantasies summoned by memories of my father’s stories could occasionally provoke very negative emotions, and the thoughts and images that made fleeting appearances during my train rides in Japan were not always charitable or fair. But I think we have to work through these perceptions and interpretations before we can make progress.

Although changes in attitude must always take place within the individual, it is the pilgrimage group as a whole that creates the social and emotional tone. Pilgrimage groups succeed or fail in the degree to which their members establish a bedrock of mutually sustaining relationships capable of offering reciprocal support, and of forming the kind of social bond described by anthropologist, Victor Turner, as ‘communitas’. The idea of communitas is easier to understand, and to bring about, if

we consider the relationships between members of a relatively homogenous group, such as pilgrims from Britain. But what if we extend this idea to include the Japanese people that the pilgrims meet? How easy is it to create similar openness and bonding?

Pilgrimages I have participated in have been complex and demanding events: physically demanding because of the itineraries, but also complex socially and culturally because we depended on the help of our Japanese friends and colleagues. As we got to know each other better, we were able to have conversations about difficult topics, and to share personal experiences across cultural boundaries. This takes time but it is the start of a reflective process through which we reach a way to recognise what we - the citizens of previously enemy nations - actually have in common. This is achieved not by shying away from our historical differences but by acknowledging and loosening them, and making space around them for change to take place.

In the aftermath of war, the personal always intersects with the global and reconciliation must acknowledge and accommodate both perspectives. The individual's interior and idiosyncratic personal world interacts constantly with external global environments. The legacy of the war with Japan created huge and intractable moral issues. For the children of the POWs, this means having to face the apocalyptic horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in the knowledge that their own existence may well have depended upon the destruction of those cities. This is an area of considerable historical and moral contestation but nevertheless remains a live issue for many children of allied POWs. As several of my interviewees said, 'I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the atom bomb'.

Effective reconciliation demands humility, a willingness to listen to the stories of others, and a commitment to communicate with respect and reflexivity. But that requires a conducive physical and social environment, one that is separate from our normal routines and responsibilities. A pilgrimage that is based on transnational (and transcultural) reconciliation can be such an environment. In these pilgrimage groups, participants travel together, exchange memories of childhood, and swap stories of the war passed down by their fathers. In Japan, this may extend to sharing the rituals of a communal bath, and doing so in the company of Japanese people of different generations. Such experiences are not easily forgotten.

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