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Getting Out

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Getting Out

The "Kamakura Maru" was tied up at the pier in Kobe. My family had been assigned a cabin above the waterline, one of the perks of Dad's exalted (but temporary) position as Deputy Swiss Observer. We even had two portholes, presumably because he might have to do some observing. For the trip from Kobe to Shanghai in August 1942 we had the ship almost to ourselves. Four Japanese diplomats were the only other passengers. Since the customs inspectors had so little to do they made all seven of us open suitcases and trunks on the pier before letting us board. Japanese in uniforms — military or otherwise — were always nice to me, but since the war started they had become less friendly to grownups who were not Japanese. Even Swiss were suspect, despite their officially neutral stance. Dad had refused to carry out a suitcase full of pearls for his old friend Mr. Yamato, who was going broke because few people left in Japan were buying pearls. As a businessman, Dad was sympathetic, but did not want the anxiety of smuggling anything.

In 1934, eight years before, my parents had left Japan on their round-the-world honeymoon after their wedding in Yokohama. But now there were no jolly friends waving and cheering and holding paper streamers as the big white ship departed. Most of those friends had already left before Pearl Harbor — any remaining British and American friends were now in concentration camps, and the Germans were either embarrassed, or rude to everybody. Swiss, Swedes, Danes, and other "non-belligerent" nationals were quietly hoping not to be noticed. Now my parents were no longer newlyweds, dancing late into the night in the glamorous salon of the "Empress of Canada." For one thing, they now had me, their five-year-old son. They were in their mid-thirties, and after spending most of their adult lives in Japan we were lucky to be leaving together on the last passenger ship.

Our Escape Begins

As the "Kamakura Maru" cast off quietly the tugboat hooted in a subdued way, and we sailed out of Kobe Harbor. I ran around meeting the crew, and finding useful places to hide, but my parents were doing what parents do in wartime — worrying, and

wondering what would become of us. I had spent my whole life in Japan, with some lengthy trips to get to know my grandparents in Switzerland and Canada. Would we make it eventually to Canada, where Mum's parents lived on their prairie farm? My Swiss grandparents were out of the question, surrounded as they were by the armies of the Third Reich. There was little room in Switzerland for refugees, even Swiss ones.

They worried about being stuck in Portuguese East Africa, where our tickets and our visas both ran out. There were rumors of real pirates off Macao and Singapore — pirates who took advantage of wartime chaos to rob, pillage, and rape, who didn't care what flag an unarmed ship was flying. We flew the Rising Sun, the flag of Imperial Japan. Would the Americans or the British torpedo our ship because of that? We were a tempting target, and the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the whole Indian Ocean lay between us and the relative safety of Lourenço Marques.

But the worries and fears were better than staying in Japan, exposed to American bombing raids, among people who were now The Enemy. Dad had been in Tokyo on the day of Jimmy Doolittle's daring raid. The planes had flown right over our house in Yokohama, waking me from my afternoon nap. Kiku-san had run up to my room from the kitchen, and I had felt her fear as she held me against her. Although the damage from the American bombs had been minimal Dad had seen the terror of Japanese around him.

As we left the Land of the Rising Sun there was a beautiful setting sun. Japan was no longer a good place for foreigners. My parents had left their furniture, books, and household things in the godown at Dad's office (254 Yamashita-cho in Yokohama), trusting his faithful Japanese employees to keep them safe. A few suitcases and three metal steamer trunks contained everything else we owned. But we were together, and my parents even allowed me to bring a couple of Tootsietoy cars.

Desperation in Shanghai

After four days at sea the water began turning muddy. As we neared the mouth of the Yangtze River we could see soil being swept into the East China Sea. I had never seen a whale before, but now they were spouting all around us, churning up the murky water. Nobody seemed to know why.

The pilot came aboard to steer the "Kamakura Maru" upriver to Shanghai, through the shifting soil, sandbars and tides of the Yangtze Delta. It was obvious that the pilot was British, the very model of an Englishman, an old China hand who had spent his whole life in the Delta. Cheerful and ruddy-faced, with blue eyes and a white mus-

tache, dressed in a crisp white shirt and shorts, and wearing a pith helmet, the pilot appeared to be fresh from a game of cricket. This man had local experience so the Japanese captain needed him to navigate the Yangtze Delta. He was not a prisoner, unlike every other British citizen in the vast Asian area the Japanese had conquered, but they resented him mightily as he steered their warships, freighters, and troop ships into the port of Shanghai. After all of Japan's glorious victories over England the Japanese had to swallow their outrage.

Dad said Shanghai looked seedy and unkempt now, and there was very little motor traffic, even on the Bund or near the Cathay Hotel. It looked bustling to me but my parents remembered it from their honeymoon in 1934. I had never seen so many Chinese people in one place. The local manager of the Swiss silk company that Dad worked for, Arnold Kobelt, took Dad and Mum out for lunch while people at the office looked after me. My first (and only) riksha ride occurred later that afternoon with Dad — the coolie was able to pull us really fast because neither of us weighed much. It felt like harness racing, but there was a sweating man in front of us instead of a horse.

There was desperation on the pier when we returned in the evening. Europeans from all over China were frantically trying to get on board the "Kamakura Maru." The normal capacity of the ship was 450, but 900 tickets had been sold. Everyone knew this would probably be the last ship evacuating civilians and diplomats for the duration of the war. Fortunately some of the Japanese crew on deck recognized us again and let us climb up the gangplank without a struggle or a long wait. Looking back sixty years later that was remarkable because it was widely believed that Japanese could not tell Europeans apart. Supposedly we also found it difficult to recognize individual Japanese — "they all look the same" — back in those days of casual racism.

Each of the milling thousands on the pier had some kind of dramatic story. Dad saw his old friend "Nan" Nancollis desperately trying to reach the bottom of the gangplank. Before the war Nan had worked in the Canadian Pacific Steamship office in Yokohama, and had been the Honorary Consul of Greece. When he was transferred to Manila, he had expected to be safely away from the Japanese, out of harm's way, but Manila turned out to be even worse. Soon after Pearl Harbor the Japanese overran the Philippines and Nan was interned there with little hope of escape. His Greek heritage saved him, and the Japanese honored their international agreements covering diplomats — even honorary ones. He was given permission to leave on the "Kamakura Maru," as long as he could make it up the gangplank.

With more than 900 passengers crammed aboard we set sail for Singapore, the only stop scheduled before Portuguese East Africa. The same English pilot steered us out

of Shanghai, and back through the Delta to the open sea. Captain Kurita, could not resist a bit of fun by turning the class-conscious foreigners' social hierarchy upside down. He put many high-ranking diplomats and luminaries into cabins way down in steerage, without portholes and near the engine room. Less exalted diplomats (like my Dad), their staff and families (like my Mum and me), and ordinary working people were given 1st Class cabins. We were also served 1st Class meals, on white tablecloths with fine china and silverware. Those below decks were served their meals from one communal pot, and each of them was issued a steel spoon and fork that they were expected to wash themselves after each meal. An irate group of ladies, who were accustomed to first class treatment, demanded a meeting with Captain Kurita. He listened patiently as my Dad translated their outraged complaints into Japanese but replied that he could not make any changes on his own initiative in such an important matter. He would have to refer the matter to Tokyo, and added that the N.Y.K steamship line might very well decide to recall the ship in order to make the changes. There were no more complaints.

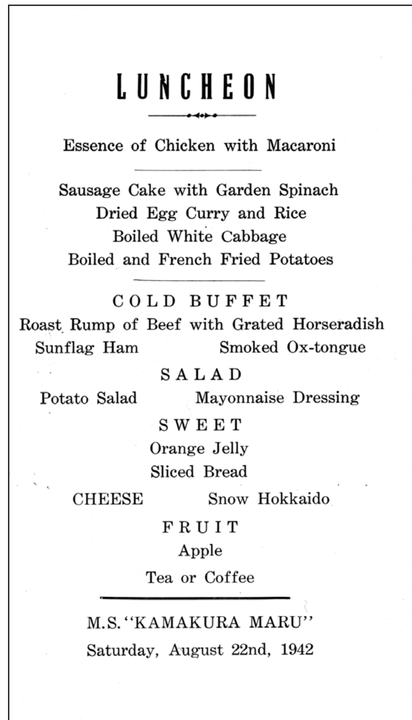
Nobody knew why there was to be a stop in Singapore. By August of 1942 British citizens there had all been killed or taken prisoner, and remained in Japanese concentration camps until the Allied victory three years later. Who could possibly be coming aboard? Where would they find space for them? Our ship first stopped at some distance from Singapore and picked up a pilot (Japanese, this time) who steered us carefully through a floating minefield. When we were nearly in the harbor a small motorboat approached with a single passenger standing in the bow — a white man dressed entirely in black. He came up a rope ladder and the motor boat sped away. This man had an American passport, and introduced himself to Captain Kurita (and a curious throng of passengers on deck) as Mr. Hartog of the Dutch firm, Lever Brothers. Interned in Hong Kong immediately after Pearl Harbor, he had been exchanged for a Japanese officer held by the British. Mr. Hartog had been brought to Singapore by the Japanese and put on board the "Kamakura Maru." Either he was a remarkably important executive at Lever Brothers, or he was not quite what he seemed. I was very curious. Could he have been a spy? Nobody among the adults seemed to know.

That evening there was a banquet with many courses, all of them British, French, or German. On the cover of the 1st Class menu was a beautiful Japanese print of a bride being dressed before her wedding, with several paragraphs in English about the painting on the back cover. My Mum read it to me when they returned to our cabin after dinner, so I learned that, "… the young lady has her hair done in a style called *Bunkin Takasimada*, and the strip of white gauze over pink silk on her head is popularly called a *tunokakusi*. The hair is further adorned with amber bars and pins, their ends intri-

cately carved in flower clusters." Perceptive passengers detected subtle gloating by the Japanese over their victory at Singapore so early in the war. As one of the bastions of British colonial power in Asia, the loss of Singapore (called Shonanto by the Japanese) had been a terrible disaster.

There were twice as many passengers as the ship was built for, so some of the fuel tanks had been filled instead with fresh drinking water. Passengers below decks had to drink water that smelled powerfully of diesel fuel. To their embarrassment, my parents did not have such mundane concerns. As official representatives of the International Red Cross they had martinis before dinner and excellent wines. They had starched linen napkins, handsome dishes and cutlery, and elegant printed menus at every meal. At least for the men there was brandy after dinner, and cigars, and there was dancing on deck later in the evening to a small Japanese dance band.

It was important for the Japanese to keep up this façade, and the ideas of elegance and Western luxury that they had acquired from the British and Americans. They did not want to be seen as barbarians, even in wartime, and they expected us to tolerate the lavish treatment, even though it was embarrassing to the small group who were so favored. Mr. Nancollis understood the situation. He had overcome danger and hardship to get aboard, but he was not resentful about being housed below decks. Most evenings my parents invited him up for martinis before his dinner around the communal dinner pot down in steerage. Oblivious to these undercurrents, and unaware of the complexities of Japanese politeness, I enjoyed it all immensely. The steward brought me Coca Cola whenever I wanted some, I had my own deck chair with my name inscribed on it, and the crew were friendly to the "boy-chan."


LUNCHEON

Essence of Chicken with Macaroni

Sausage Cake with Garden Spinach
Dried Egg Curry and Rice
Boiled White Cabbage
Boiled and French Fried Potatoes

COLD BUFFET
Roast Rump of Beef with Grated Horseradish
Sunflag Ham Smoked Ox-tongue

SALAD
Potato Salad Mayonnaise Dressing

SWEET
Orange Jelly
Sliced Bread

CHEESE Snow Hokkaido

FRUIT
Apple

Tea or Coffee

M.S. "KAMAKURA MARU"
Saturday, August 22nd, 1942

Dinner menu from the refugee ship "Kamakura Maru" during voyage from Shanghai to Lourenço Marques, 1942. A different menu was distributed daily to first-class passengers, despite wartime circumstances.

Through the Sunda Straits we went, between Java and Sumatra and into the In-

dian Ocean, heading toward Lourenço Marques. In the plodding three weeks we took to go from Shanghai to Mozambique we saw few other vessels from either the Allies or Axis. They must have been there, but they left us alone. Passing through the South China Sea, we were very near where the Japanese sank HMS "Prince of Wales" and "Repulse" the previous year.

We were completely unarmed because no shooting was expected. With all the diplomats on board the "Kamakura Maru" was traveling under a "safe conduct" agreement, so we had to follow a prescribed route at a carefully set speed. Warships on both sides had to know precisely where we were so they did not mistake us for a target. Every day at noon, our position, speed, and course was broadcast in several languages, and it was my Dad's job to do that. On the foredeck a large sign about ten feet square was illuminated at night with red and white light bulbs in the shape of the Red Cross. Along the hull the word "Diplomats" in huge letters was illuminated from dusk until dawn, which must have been an astonishing sight in the empty darkness of a wartime night. Protected by an agreement between countries that were at war with each other, we were a daily reminder that such pacts can be achieved and maintained even in wartime. Our lives depended on the honor of both sides.

Dad's Role — The Right Man At the Right Time

Mr. Sakamoto, one of the Japanese diplomats who had traveled from Kobe with us, threw a small farewell party as we neared our destination. He was a very formal gentleman on his way to Bern as the new Japanese Ambassador to Switzerland. Finding a Swiss aboard who spoke fluent Japanese was a big help to him, and he and Dad had long conversations. He did not invite the mysterious Mr. Hartog to his party, but he did invite my parents. Mr. Sakamoto confided to them his fears for the future, and his doubts that Japan's military successes could continue. All the Japanese diplomats were on their own in getting to their embassies in Europe. Sakamoto felt that the war's outcome depended on the siege of Stalingrad, and when the German 7th Army surrendered at Stalingrad in January 1943 it must have seemed to Mr. Sakamoto that his worst fears were coming true. We learned later that the poor man committed suicide in Bern not long afterward. Perhaps he was a spy, as many diplomats are during wartime, but he was an ambassador in the very best sense — an emissary who represented the best of his country when it sent him abroad. Dad considered him a friend.

Approaching the African coast, the "Kamakura Maru" sailed close to the Comoro Islands and Madagascar, through the Mozambique Channel and finally into Delagoa Bay on September 6th of 1942. Fragrant scented breezes of the tropics wafted through

the portholes. Exotic and colorful shrubs, bushes, and trees lined a wide boulevard beside the ship. Dad waved happily to people riding on a brightly colored bus. They waved back, so we knew it was not all an illusion. We moored right alongside the plaza in downtown Lourenço Marques, the capital city of Mozambique. The sun was shining, we were safe, and the first leg of our escape from Japan had been accomplished.

The Polana Hotel, situated on a perfect sandy beach, was the most luxurious hotel I had ever seen. We could not afford many nights there because Dad's job with the Red Cross was over. My parents never discussed finances or the war in front of me, but they looked worried, and I could hear the murmur of their talks in the middle of the night. We had no tickets to anywhere. We had no visas to anywhere except Brazil, graciously given to us out of a clear blue sky by a Mr. Bopp, who had been the Brazilian Consul in Yokohama. The Brazilian Consulate was upstairs from Dad's office, and Mr. Bopp was a good neighbor. He believed that people should have something up their sleeves for emergencies in uncertain times. So here we were, in an emergency, and the times were certainly uncertain.

Mr. Hartog had become quite friendly with my parents during the slow passage across the Indian Ocean, and wanted us to join him on his trip by freighter to Brazil. He was planning to travel on from Brazil to Toronto, and even offered to arrange tickets to Canada for us. It was a crazy idea, but a lot better than spending the war stuck in Lourenço Marques. We had visas, thanks to Mr. Bopp, and now we had a fellow traveler who seemed to know his way around. My parents were beginning to rely on the kindness of strangers, and there were not many alternatives.

Realizing that you have no home is lonely and scary. I came in from a trip to the bathroom down the hall and found Mum and Dad in each others' arms, surrounded by partially unpacked suitcases. I knew things must be serious because they did not spring apart from each other. Like most parents in those days, they hardly ever hugged or kissed in front of their children. What would happen to us next? I hoped they knew.

At the same pier, moored just ahead of the "Kamakura Maru," was a British passenger ship named the "Narkunda," an older passenger ship of the P. & O. line that had been converted for duty as a troop ship. She was part of the exchange process and had arrived from England the previous day, bringing Japanese diplomats and civilians on their way back to Japan. The "Kamakura Maru" would be returning to Kobe full of Japanese, while the "Narkunda" was returning to Liverpool. My parents had several good friends who were now living in Britain and, as a Canadian, Mum would be able to claim British refugee status for us there. Spending the war in England was preferable to a precarious life in Portuguese East Africa or Brazil (although it was more dangerous in England, and the climate was certainly worse). They desperately wanted to be

on the “Narkunda,” but she was, of course, full. They had no tickets or visas, and no prospect of getting them.

That evening they had dinner at the Polana Hotel with Colonel Steiger, a Swiss diplomat from Bern who had been the Chief Delegate aboard the “Narkunda” on her voyage from Europe. There were, he mentioned casually, two ships going back to England. He would be returning on the other one, a ship called the “El Nil.” He desperately needed to find another Swiss Chief Delegate for the “Narkunda.”

The Answer to our Prayers

In the lives of many people there are times when everything falls into place, and when the good Lord smiles down with a radiant smile. As Steiger talked my parents could almost hear the heavenly choirs singing. Dad told him, in as nonchalant a tone as he could muster, that by a lucky coincidence he was available, and would be happy to serve his country in exchange for passage to Liverpool. He had experience, having done the same job on the “Kamakura Maru.” And so Colonel Steiger appointed Hans Baenninger on the spot, and cabled to Bern that he had found the right person — an experienced Swiss businessman.

Mum sent a cable that night to Richardson, Saskatchewan telling her anxious family that we were safe in a neutral place, and would soon be en route to England under another “safe conduct” agreement. Thanks to Colonel Steiger and the Swiss government, we moved at once from the Polana Hotel onto the “Narkunda.” The “Narkunda” really was a troop ship, and it was still wartime. When Dad turned back the sheet on his bunk the mattress was heavily bloodstained. We were fortunate to have been spared the sight of blood, but many of our fellow passengers had seen a great deal of it in recent months. The Japanese who were going home on the “Kamakura Maru” had cleaned out all the stores. It was clear they were expecting things in Japan to be much worse than what they had left in Europe.

Lourenço Marques was a lovely city, lush and green, with white colonial buildings and beautiful white beaches. The Port Commander, a handsome Portuguese with lots of gold braid on his uniform, came to pay Dad a courtesy visit before we set sail for Liverpool. Cocktails with a congenial group of diplomats reminded my parents of the Yacht Club in Yokohama in the happier days of the 1930s. The “Narkunda” was full of extraordinary people from all over the Far East who had gathered in Mozambique for this voyage. Once again my Dad was the man in charge of ensuring them all a “safe passage” to England, and making sure that warships on both sides knew where we were and what we were up to. It was a weighty responsibility for a friendly 37-year-old Swiss whose expertise was in accounting, in the export of raw silk, and in languages. He was my hero.

Postscript

This essay is condensed from a book that my younger brother and I wrote about our parents. It is called *In the Eye of the Wind* and will be published later this year by McGill-Queen's University Press in Canada. The events we recount began in 1933 at the Yokohama Yacht Club, and ended in December 1942 on a troop ship zigzagging alone across the North Atlantic, bound for Halifax.

Sailboats, ocean liners, and steam ships linked our parents' lives together, and carried them around the world. The story spans three continents — Asia, Europe (where Dad was born in Switzerland in 1905, the son of a rural policeman), and North America (where Mum was born in 1906, the daughter of a wheat farmer on the prairies of Saskatchewan). Their story is about trying to find a safe home as the world went to war.

Japan in the 1930s was a glamorous and exotic place for foreigners who lived there. Their lives revolved around the embassies and consulates, around the yacht club and the polo club. But the colonial era was ending, and by 1939 it was in tatters. World War II broke out during their home leave in Switzerland, surrounded on all sides by the armies of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Fleeing home again to Japan our parents found an alien, militaristic culture preparing for war. After Pearl Harbor, in 1941, we had round-the-clock sentries posted by the front gate, and most of their friends were in concentration camps. Their long, perilous flight in 1942 on Japanese and British steamships to the safety of Canada was as close to a real homecoming as they ever found.

I was born in Yokohama in 1937 as the armies of Japan invaded China. My brother arrived on the scene in Canada, at the very end of the war in 1945, an early baby-boomer. It seemed to both of us, as we reached the age of reflection, that it was time to save personal memories of those years, memories of an everyday young couple and their little boy. They were bystanders to history, desperately trying to stay out of the way of some of the forces that dominated the 20th century.

Fortunately for us Dad remained until 2006, when he died at 101. The book is based on his lengthy notes (that I insisted he write out), on family photograph albums, and on our Mum's daily diaries spanning 50 years. With these resources and my own recollections from childhood, the memories of surviving relatives in Switzerland and Canada, and historical sources, we have pieced together this memoir of our parents' lives in an exciting time, something few brothers have a chance to do.

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