

True Story of Joseph and Alida Winnemuller – WW 2 Japanese POW's for 3 ½ Years

Joseph and Alida were taken prisoners of war by the Japanese during the Second World War on the island of Java in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) from 1942 to 1945.

Joseph and Alida dated for five years. Joseph was employed as a psychiatric nurse in a mental institution in Holland from 1931 to 1938 but because of the depression, he was unable to find employment that paid a higher salary to accommodate a wife. They met a couple on vacation in Holland who managed a dairy farm on a rubber plantation on Java who offered Joseph work. On March 22, 1938 Joseph and Alida married in Holland and left one week later by boat to the Dutch East Indies and they settled on the island of Java in the capital city of Batavia (Jakarta). Their new home was “paradise” where they started their family and by 1942 had three children, Herman, Peter and Corry.

In preparation of a war, all Dutch citizens were called into military service. Since Joseph was a qualified male nurse, he served his country as a medic in the home guard (a reserve army). The home guard taught him how to throw hand grenades and molotov cocktails. He was trained in guerilla warfare but the most important aspect of his survival was learning how to live off the land when his own food supply was used up. In 1942 the young family's strength was tested with the Japanese invasion of the Dutch East Indies. Joseph surrendered to the Japanese and was separated from his wife and three small children (ages 3 years, 2 years and 4 weeks respectively).

Living in various concentration camps on the island of Java for 3 1/2 years with three small children was not easy for Alida. All of her worldly possessions were left behind and she was only allowed to take two suitcases and a baby carriage for Corry. She did everything possible to keep her children alive. Fortunately, at the first camp she was allowed to grow a vegetable garden. She constantly worried about her second son, Peter who became very thin and malnourished and she was afraid he would die. She breast fed her daughter as long as she could but with malnutrition, menstruation ceased. After 1 1/2 years, they were transferred to another camp and she again was only allowed to take what they could carry. Some mothers were separated from their children and she always took great care in keeping them close to her at all times. At this camp all boys fourteen years and older were taken away on trucks. For many mothers it was very difficult to see their sons still boys taken away. Food was very poor and since the camp was close to the river, she was very resourceful in finding ways to acquire food such as catching large frogs and snails as well as insects to eat with their small ration of rice.

In December 1944, she and the children were again sent to another camp that had 16 large bamboo barracks and each barrack housed 500 women and children. Food was still very scarce yet everyday 2000 women went to work on a large vegetable field and all of the produce went to the Japanese. She was very concerned about her sons who both developed dysentery and who continued to lose weight. It was a day to day battle for Alida and her children to stay alive.

Joseph spent the first sixteen months of his internment on Java and Singapore. He went through the hell of Thailand where he was forced to work on the famous Burma railroad beside the River Kwai. He worked through dense jungle clearing undergrowth, cutting trees, breaking up rock with primitive tools in the extreme heat and pouring rain during the monsoon season. All of his belongings were taken away from him except a small prayer book which the Japanese overlooked. Out of this little book, Joseph derived his hope and strength in the difficult days to come. Since he was not allowed his own writing material, he secretly wrote in between the lines of this prayer book, notes, dates and other happenings with a piece of charcoal. Joseph also hid from the Japanese his wedding ring which he tied on a string and kept between his legs.

He suffered and witnessed unbelievable hardship. He was beaten, abused, malnourished and came down with beri-beri, dysentery and malaria. He was forced to do very hard physical labour in the unbearable conditions of the jungle. Because of his knowledge of survival in the jungle, he would look for wild spinach, purslane, bamboo shoots and wild bananas to supplement his meagre meal of rice and dried fish or watery soup. Throughout Joseph's internment, he always administered medical aid and support and compassion to his fellow prisoners even though medicine and medical supplies were not always available. With monsoon season, cholera was rampant in many of the camps. Joseph witnessed unforgettable suffering when he volunteered to bury the dead at another camp a few miles away. In 1943 the railroad was completed and Joseph was transported to a hospital camp where he recovered from his malaria.

While he was in Thailand, he was permitted to send three postcards (pre-typed by the Japanese) to his family on Java. His family did receive them but assumed he was still on Java. All during his internment, he did not receive any news from his family and did not know if they were still alive. He was then put on a boat with 600 other prisoners in convoy with 16 ships and 3 destroyers as guard to Japan. This was a very dangerous 40 day voyage where they were under the constant threat of being attacked by the submarines of the allied forces. He was then forced to work the last thirteen months of the war in a smelter factory close to Yokaichi where he was exposed to deadly gasses and dust from the furnaces where various kinds of ore were melted which were used for the war machine. At war's end, Joseph escaped harm from the allied forces bombing missions over the area where Joseph was interned. He was liberated on September 5, 1945.

Joyously and miraculously after 3 1/2 years, Joseph was reunited with his family on the island of Borneo. They moved back to Batavia (Jakarta) and remained there for one more year and in 1948 returned to Holland where Joseph became dually qualified as an RN, as well as an RPN. In 1953, the Winnemullers once again boarded ship and came to Canada where they settled in Selkirk, Manitoba. Joseph worked at the Selkirk Mental Health Centre for 23 years as a night supervisor.

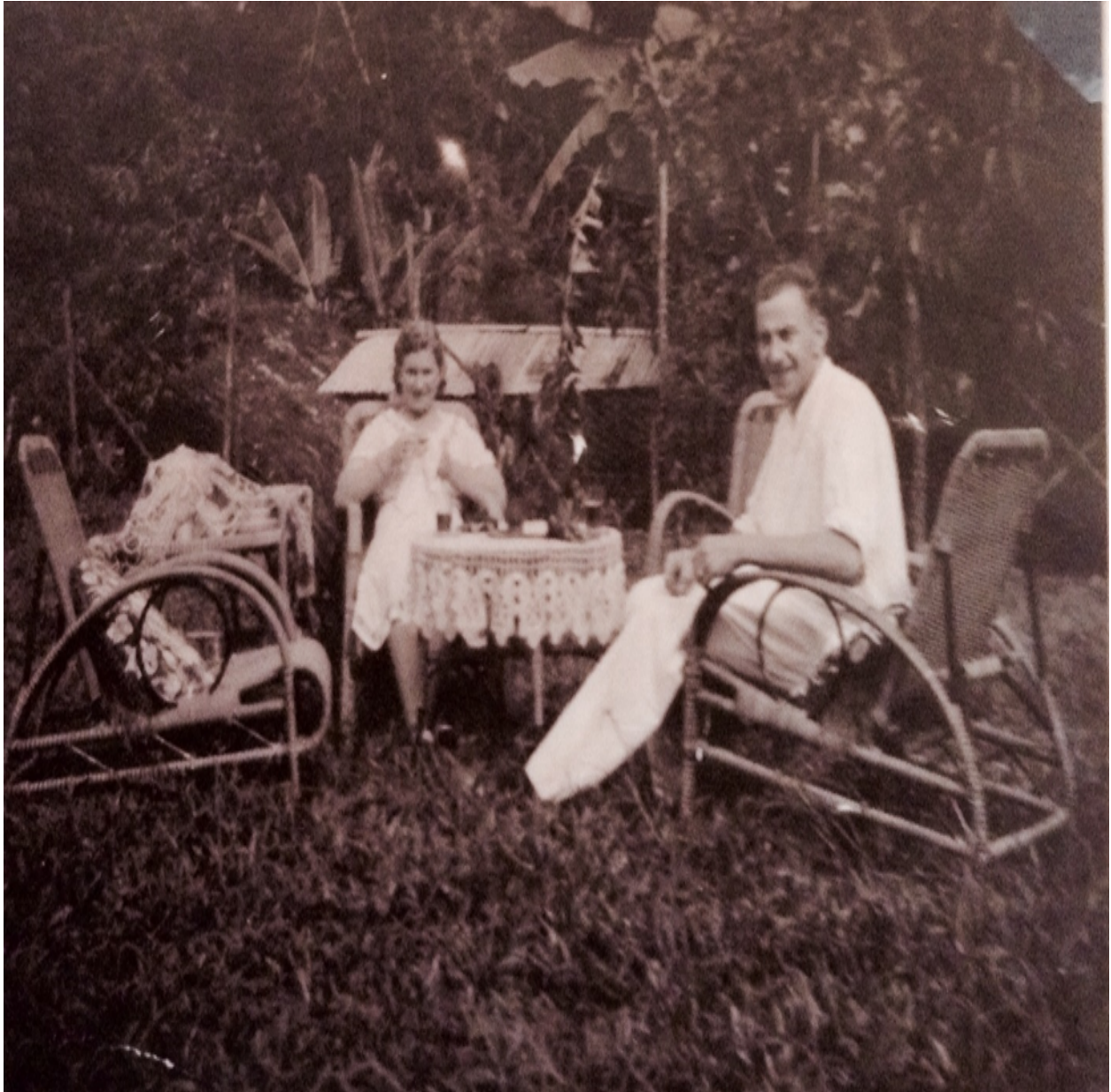
Alida and Joseph were married for 61 years and raised a family of seven. Alida and Joseph passed away at the ages of 79 and 91 respectively. It was their quiet strength, great courage, love, self-sacrifice and a strong faith that helped with their survival. After the war, Joseph expanded his notes in greater detail from the prayer book at the request of his family and when he retired, these notes were translated from Dutch to English and wrote a book about his experience as a POW.

The following is an excerpt from his book:

“Many times when telling stories about the war, people have asked me “You must hate the Japanese?” I do not! I would not be a Christian if I hated them for what they did to me and many others. They had a reason to start the war. They were living with 100 million people on a few small islands; they were not allowed to expand. They had perhaps never started this war if we had granted them what they have been granted now. Why did millions of people have to die first? What a suffering it has brought on to so many innocent people. What a chaos the world is in at the moment. War is a dirty chess match! It fills only treasure boxes andcoffins. - J. Winnemuller”



March 22, 1938 - Noordwykerhout, Holland



Batavia (Jakarta), 1938



Batavia (Jakarta), 1939



J. Winnemuller - Yokaichi, Japan POW



J. Winnemuller fabricated these items out of his tin canteen during his first months as a prisoner in Tjimahi (Java). At this camp, the prisoners were permitted to use their artistic skills to make various things some of which were sold and the money raised went into a fund to support the POW camp hospital



Corry, Peter, Alida and Herman - 1946



Batavia (Jakarta) - 1947



1987



Corry, Peter, Herman - September 5, 2015