

SONG OF SURVIVAL

Women Interned

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A recent discussion with a friend reminded me of a book I had read some 20 years ago. I read it again and am again moved as much as I was at my first reading. The book is autobiographic. It is written by Helen Colijn, a Dutch woman who was interned for more than 3 years in a camp in Indonesia during the Second World War. The book tells the story of how her family was living in Indonesia, how they wanted to leave when the war started and how their ship was bombed and sunk. They managed to reach the shore alive, but could not stay free from the Japanese enemy, they were interned. Though their imprisonment conditions were severe, this story is not so much the story of war imprisonment and unbearable conditions. The imprisonment is only the background for a wonderful story of how these women were able to survive and keep hope under difficult conditions. They created a vocal orchestra, singing not words but sounds. Singing music from famous composers originally written for piano or orchestra. They sang it as they remembered it. This music was so powerful that even the Japanese camp guards, the imprisoned women's enemies, came to listen.

The book "Song of survival – women interned", led to the production of a documentary movie "Paradise Road" and to the CD "Paradise Road, the song of survival" with the music of this movie.

Since I am not able to be more precise or more concise, hereunder is the citation of the text written by Helen Colijn as it appears on the CD-booklet.

"The music on this CD, as heard in Paradise Road, is called "vocal orchestra music" – women singing music written for piano or orchestra. During the Second World War this innovative music helped a group of women to survive a wartime situation in the Dutch East Indies that had been occupied by Japan. (The Dutch colony became Indonesia in 1949.)

From April, 1942, to the end of the war in August, 1945, an average of six hundred Australian, British and Dutch women and children were interned in a Japanese camp on the island of Sumatra. They were plucked from their South Sumatra homes or were survivors of evacuation vessels that left Singapore but were sunk in the Bangka Strait. Among the Dutch internees were my two teenage sisters and myself.

For three-and-a-half years all of us lived packed together in houses or ramshackle barracks. We never had enough to eat or medicines to treat rampant malaria, dysentery and beriberi. We never received news about the progress of the war, about husbands and fathers in P.O.W. or men's camps, or relatives in other women's camps. (The Japanese interned close to a hundred thousand non-Asian civilians in the Dutch East Indies.) We had no books to read nor instruments to play. But we did have our voices.

Groups of women sang popular songs in English or in Dutch. When after a year no one could remember any new ones, two of the British women created the vocal orchestra. Margaret Dryburgh, a Presbyterian missionary in Singapore, long-time piano teacher, and church organist, wrote from memory scores of piano and orchestra works. Norah Chambers, a government engineer's wife in Malaya, helped Miss Dryburgh rearrange the scores for four voices, and during secret rehearsals, conducted a new Dutch/English choir of thirty women, including my sisters. The impact of the first concert on December 27, 1943, on all of us was tremendous. Instead of the popular songs we expected, the glorious sounds of the Largo of Dvorak's New World filled the compound, followed by more music by Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, and Tchaikovsky. The music seemed a miracle among the hunger, disease, rats, cockroaches, bedbugs and smell of latrines. The music reinforced our sense of human dignity. We could rise above it all. We would struggle on.

In the year that followed, the vocal orchestra gave several more concerts. It built up a repertoire of thirty pieces, including Ravel's Bolero and traditional works like "Auld Lang Syne." When almost half the singers had died from malnutrition and tropic diseases, the vocal orchestra sang no more.

After our release, the singers' vocal orchestra scores lay forgotten. However, in 1981 my sister Antoinette, in Washington, D.C., donated her vocal orchestra collection to Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. This gift led to concerts by the Peninsula Women's Chorus to make a tape for the Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound, to the Song of Survival documentary telecast in the USA and other countries, to my book, Song of Survival – Women Interned, (White Cloud Press, 1995), to the publication of Song of Survival sheet music and, finally, to the making of this feature film, Paradise Road."

The songs of the movie are by the Dutch "Malle Babbe Women's Choir". It has been producing concerts many times in several countries. I know that in 2005 a concert was given in Yokohama. It was organised by a Dutch-Japanese team in order to promote peace and reconcile former enemies as was the case between the Dutch and the Japanese people during the Second World War in Indonesia.

For the scores:

<https://library.stanford.edu/blogs/stanford-libraries-blog/2015/05/songs-survival-vocal-music-women-pows>

and

<https://singingtosurvive.com/>