

The childhood trauma legacy of the Pacific War: An undocumented example of late life trauma

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1. Introduction

Canada is plagued by a disturbing legacy: the psychological damage suffered by many Indigenous children who attended the First Nations residential school system. These survivors have carried scars into their adult years, a social cost not just to themselves but also to the State. I wish to focus attention on somewhat similar psychological issues that surfaced in Dutch society decades after the end of the Second World War. Useful insights may be gained from this source.

In that country, the unexpected discovery in May, 1945 of about 2,000 orphaned Holocaust survivors only accidentally became a topic of academic interest in 1966, after the children had achieved adult status. More than a decade later, a growing incidence of psychiatric clinical evidence forced academic attention on those who had shared my fate of having endured childhood in a Japanese POW (prisoner of war) camp. Coming to grips with lasting impacts of childhood trauma can take a long time. I bring to your attention two pieces of information: the work of Dutch researchers on the topic of sequential childhood trauma, and my personal experience as a case in point.

In Canada, the residential school trauma legacy received attention in the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008-2015) via a research paper by Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson (2006). He mentions a statistical survey suggesting that 65% of former residential school attendees suffered from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). The source of his information is the more detailed account of this statistic found in the paper by Corrado and Cohen (2003). Brasfield (2001) makes a similar observation.

From the little I know of residential schools, but informed by my personal experience as a child survivor of a POW camp, my reaction to this statistic is: 'Why only 65%?' Corrado and Cohen (2003), noting the small sample and its peculiar nature, hint at a similar concern. I should note, however, that whereas the

discussion around residential schools has been dominated by abuse of various types suffered by some Indigenous children, the experience of the author, who did not suffer personal abuse, points at a more insidious and widespread contributing source of lasting negative effects caused by a profoundly disrupted childhood.

2. My experience

In my eightieth year (2018), a Dutch government agency deemed that I had been a PTSD sufferer. I had not anticipated this reaction to my request for financial compensation for war-time suffering, submitted on the advice of a friend and fellow prison camp survivor, who had received support for well over a decade.

My request had prompted an unexpected psychiatric assessment but, to my chagrin, denied me financial support, though promising me assistance were my psychological condition to deteriorate. This was a strange turn of events. What had happened?

My PTSD diagnosis rested on two factors:

- My incarceration in a Japanese POW camp (prisoner 17818 in *Tjihapit* prison camp in Bandung, and 20461 in *Tjideng* prison camp in Jakarta).
- Psychiatric assessment of my postwar history, rather than my current situation.

During my two interviews with the psychiatrist, I discussed *inter alia* my unstable social history, my failed first marriage, weirdly contrasting with my academic and professional success. From the start of my education in my ninth year, I gradually gained academic proficiency, culminating in the award of a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford upon graduating from Carleton University, and three years later, commencing a successful thirty-eight-year career in engineering and management. However, within a year of starting my working life, I became depressed and married strangely. This dysfunctional relationship lasted twenty-three years, before I finally divorced and started a second, successful marriage. This approximates the story I told the psychiatrist in 2018.

Up to this date, I had never considered myself as traumatized. I never pondered the cause of my depression, nor my odd marriage. I had concealed past psychological discomforts in a mental box that I did not want to examine. I pretended all was fine. Two questions now arose in my mind:

- How did the Dutch government become involved in PTSD determination?
- What is meant by PTSD in my case? I could not consider myself 'shell-shocked', in the classical description of the ailment. I could recall some traumatic childhood prison camp events but those did not register prominently in my later adult years.

3. Dutch academic involvement

I will begin with the first question. Through chance, I stumbled onto some key publications, the earliest being that of Hans Keilson.¹ In 1945, Keilson assisted in determining the postwar fate of about 2,000 Jewish orphans emerging in Holland from hiding after the Second World War. In the course of this work, he noted that many seemed traumatized.

A decade later, he undertook a study of the available clinical documentation for a sample of 204 orphans and carried out interviews to gain further clinical insight into their later experience. He did this investigation under the supervision of the Child Psychology Clinic of Amsterdam University. In his 1978 PhD thesis (second edition published in 2005), he classified the clinical symptoms of individual cases according to age and three sequential 'traumatic events': a) removal from the mother, b) life as a foster-child during the war, c) definition of final postwar status (fostering, adoption, etc.). Keilson (2005) noted that 91% of his sample suffered from lasting forms of trauma, that the child's age affected the impact of traumatic events of each sequence and moreover that postwar events often were more devastating than those endured during the war.

It is important to note that Keilson's work drew on documentation collected for the children immediately after the war for an objective unrelated to academic analysis. As an aside, in Canada, the last residential school closed in 1996 and thus all school attendees have long ago become adults. The day of clinical examinations of First Nations children is, hence, long past.

Almost simultaneously with Keilson, P.G. Bekkering and M. Bekkering-Merens (1980), writing in a medical journal, drew attention to clinical symptoms among patients and acquaintances who all had spent childhood years in Japanese prison camps in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). Keilson's thesis prompted them to re-examine their clinical records and develop a similar sequential traumatization model for Japanese prison camp survivors. They assigned their 58 patients, born between 1927 and 1942, into three sequences: a) outbreak of war, b) incarceration, c) postwar adjustment (Bekkering & Bekkering-Merens 1985). They found broad agreement with Keilson's observations, particularly with respect to the significant role played by the post-war adjustment process. In this case, they also suspected that childhood trauma had caused psychiatric symptoms in adulthood. Explanation of a causal mechanism remained absent due to the combination of a small sample size and the diversity of clinical symptoms.

¹ Dr. H.A. Keilson, (1909-2011) was a Dutch-German medical doctor, child psychologist, novelist, and poet.

Incidentally, residential school survivors are now all adults with the youngest being perhaps around forty years old, a situation not dissimilar to that of the Japanese POW survivors still alive, studied by Bekkering and Bekkering-Merens (1980 and 1985).

By the early 1990s, mounting evidence of psychological distress among the ageing population of NEI refugees precipitated a need for a government investigation to (possibly) justify financial support for this select but controversial population segment. Increasing critical media commentary regarding the Netherlands' imperial past, and especially the failed, bloody, attempt, forty years earlier, by the Dutch government, to retain imperial control over its Indonesian colony, added to the political sensitivity of this topic. Financial support for former colonists would meet with heated opposition.

The government now wanted to know whether wartime had affected children in the NEI differently from children in the Netherlands. Mooren and Kleber (2013) attempted to answer that question.

The survey designed by Mooren and Kleber (2013) called for rigorous sampling and testing. Investigators identified random samples of prison camp survivors and those who had experienced war in the Netherlands. As the data sets were collected fifty years after the end of the Second World War, all child survivors were adults (Mooren & Kleber 2013, 1786). Mooren and Kleber (2013) submitted their statistical work to the Dutch government in 1995. In their subsequent paper, Mooren and Kleber (2013) concluded that their statistical analysis confirmed the existence of a generic child Japanese prison camp survivor problem.

Mooren and Kleber's (2013) statistical investigation justified the WUBO legislation (*Wet Uitkeringen Burgeroorlogsslachtoffers 1940-1945*, 'Benefit Act for Civilian War Victims, 1940-1945'), under which I had applied, along with some 8,400 others² (out of a population of 26,000 'camp-children'). The low application rate can be explained by the following: a) inability to file an application because of mental and social state of the victim, b) reluctance to submit oneself to psychiatric assessment (denial and stigma), and c) lack of information about the legislation among the NEI post-war diaspora world-wide (in my own case).

To conclude this section, it should be noted that one manifestation of psychiatric difficulties is reflected in the prison population. The proportion of First Nations inmates in Canadian federal penitentiaries exceeds their share of the population by a huge margin. Hence, it is important to ask if the residential school system played a role in this tragedy, and if so, why?

² Statistic provided by the *Sociale Verzekeringsbank* (a Dutch organization which implements social insurance plans) in Leiden (The Netherlands) for the period ending on December 31, 2021.

4. Literary controversy

Controversy regarding late-life trauma among childhood prison camp survivors also emerged in Dutch literary circles. While Bekkering and Bekkering-Merens (1980 and 1985), themselves both prison camp survivors, were first ringing the clinical alarm bell, the celebrated novelist, Jeroen Brouwers,³ published his acclaimed autobiographical novel, *Bezonden Rood* ('Sunken Red'), in 1981. This book portrayed a traumatized individual reflecting on his childhood in the prison camp — my prison camp in fact, *Tjideng* — and attributing his trauma to ghastly spectacles he witnessed as a five-year-old. The book almost immediately precipitated a backlash among other prison camp survivors for portraying Japanese behaviour, at least his remembered version of it, in hyperbolic terms.

Another author, Rudy Kousbroek,⁴ — also a Japanese prison camp survivor — took public issue with Brouwers' description as a fabrication designed to distract public attention from the role of the former colonial regime in the NEI. In one of a series of lengthy newspaper opinion pieces, he also reflects with considerable scepticism on the findings of Bekkering and Bekkering-Merens (1980 and 1985), who had drawn attention to both physical as well as psychological symptoms of what might be called a Japanese camp syndrome. Somatic problems can be verified by physical evidence, Kousbroek (1992) argued, but psychological problems are, in his opinion, imagined. How can you determine cause and effect? He attributed the phenomenon to a narcissistic victim's mentality. When Mooren and Kleber (2013) published their extensive survey findings, Kousbroek's (1992) reservations lost credibility.

Brouwers modified his position shortly before his death in 2022, when he claimed that he had not suffered from prison camp trauma but from Catholic boarding school trauma. At age ten, his parents had enrolled him, a difficult child, into a boys' Catholic boarding school. A half-century later, this prompted him to write the sensational novel *Het hout* ('The wood') — an allusion to corporal punishment, lavishly administered in such an institution.

Both authors with childhood memories of Japanese prison camps expressed dramatically conflicting opinions about their experience. How is this possible? Age played a dominant role as demonstrated by Keilson (2005). Brouwers emerged at age five and Kousbroek at age sixteen. Brouwers commenced his postwar years as an unruly child unable to adjust to primary school, whereas Kousbroek managed to enter a *gymnasium*, i.e., a secondary school preparing students for a classical university education. Their contrasting views of POW camp-life do not reflect contrasting experiences so much as their

³ Jeroen Brouwers (1940-2022). Fellow internee in Tjideng and acclaimed novelist.

⁴ Rudy Kousbroek (1929-2010). Poet, journalist, interned on Sumatra.

later recollections of their past. The memories a sixteen-year-old retains at advanced age of his past environment, of the discussions he had with other prisoners, differ significantly from that of a five-year-old child, floundering in an unfamiliar new social world, hardly in a position to engage in dialog with playmates. I emerged from the camp as a seven-year-old child and can therefore shed some light on the experience of younger members of the cohort.

5. My interest in trauma

Before I describe my own postwar experience, I will first address the second question asked earlier: what impact did my unexpected designation as a former PTSD sufferer have on me?

Reading that 2018 letter from the Dutch government gave me a jolt. I had never before considered myself as traumatized. All of a sudden, the sad, anecdotal information I had for decades been gathering about fellow internees now seemed to apply to me as well, at least in the opinion of a psychiatrist. I had always considered myself as an individual who had emerged from the POW camp in rather good condition. I had never considered the possibility of a causal link between my wartime experience as a child and my dysfunctional marriage. My academic success seemed to rule out any such notion. I had simply dismissed my unfortunate first marriage as a question of bad judgement, perhaps combined with bad luck. In fact, before 1990, the year my father died, I had given the past no thought whatsoever. I wanted to forget my shameful, postwar history.

My second marriage changed my life, but at the time I did not fathom the extent of that change. I then merely saw it as a matter of good fortune allowing me to close one story of my life and start afresh. I had in fact exchanged one form of tunnel vision for another.

As part of this distinctly new 'me', and stimulated by my father's death, I had begun to research material for a book, which had as its theme my parents' wartime suffering and postwar recovery in spite of other setbacks. Contradictions riddled this story. I wished to acknowledge the wartime history of my father, when for most of that time I remained ignorant of his existence due to his internment. For that period of my life, I only had one parent — my mother. My memories provided the driving force of my chronicle while I opted to ignore my own past and my relationship with my father.

Understanding why my parents had made their momentous decisions stimulated extensive research. I therefore sought contact with surviving friends of my parents who had shared these trials and in some cases I could only consult their children. In all this work I left unaddressed a glaring emotional conundrum: my complicated relationship with my father in a story that tried to honour him and empathise with him. I did not try to understand this inherent conflict.

My book, *Tjideng Reunion* (2008), nevertheless described in detail what had happened in my prison camps during the war. In other words, I inadvertently and unintentionally spelled out, in its pages, the potential cause of my PTSD. I even included significant war-time anecdotes about children I had known before the war and who had also endured the prison camps, but whose postwar life was troubled. I nevertheless considered their postwar misfortune a taboo subject.

In brief, my story ran as follows. After NEI capitulation (March 8, 1942), the Japanese army initiated a process of systematic ethnic cleansing to eliminate from the Far East all signs of Western influence:

- All working-age European men were immediately incarcerated. We became penniless.
- Six months later, European women and children and elderly men were rounded up.
- Finally, in a process that lasted until the first atom bomb fell, all boys passing their tenth birthday were periodically evicted from the women's camps and incarcerated separately.

In this process, family members were scattered and isolated from one another. My conclusion is that all incarcerated families were severely damaged.⁵

Publication of my book, in 2008, immediately brought to my attention more cases of suffering by child camp survivors late in life. One of my information sources, mentioned in my book, refused to attend my book-launch. He had withdrawn himself from society and had become an acute burden for his wife. Readers wrote to thank me for shining a light on the mysterious past of their parents who had behaved strangely. Those parents were of my generation. They also asked me: "How did the war affect you, Boudewijn?" A perfectly understandable reaction. The question stumped me. I had enjoyed success and the war did not seem to have affected me. None so blind as those who do not want to see.

In 2013, I heard the appalling news that a fellow *Tjideng* internee, living near Victoria and fondly known to the local community as Bonsai Bob, had committed suicide. The man in question (*Tjideng* prisoner 3218 and of my age) had lived for decades deep in the woods, like a recluse, isolated as well from his surviving younger sister.

Five years later, and not much wiser, I received the startling news that a psychiatrist had deemed me to be a former PTSD sufferer.

⁵ A small number of non-European people (Chinese, Arabs) were also incarcerated because of their Western outlook on life. The large, mixed-race community was also affected by race-based policies, although not incarcerated.

This diagnosis finally forced me to confront my own hidden, uncomfortable past, and to examine what I had unconsciously self-censored from my book and to reflect on the mysterious steps, that almost two decades after the war, lunged my life so suddenly from standing on the cusp of an exciting, promising future into a cesspit of despair and a dysfunctional marriage. The war had clearly played a role. This examination prompted two questions regarding my psyche at that turning point in my life:

- How had I emerged from the war? Or, put another way, had I as a seven-year-old displayed troubled behaviour?
- How did my relationship with my father develop after our strange postwar reunion?

Photographs (see appendix) taken within the prison camps, during and shortly after the war, provide at least a shallow pictorial clue of our environment and states of mind.

6. How my trauma began

Let me provisionally set aside the thorny question whether my condition justified PTSD diagnosis. Bekkering-Merens (1980 and 1985) refrained from the use of this term on account of the diversity of the psychosomatic ailments she and her husband encountered. In their 1985 paper, Bekkering and Bekkering-Merens only use the term “Dutch East Indies camp child”. The study by Mooren and Kleber (2013) suggested the existence of a widespread problem among the cohort of prison camp survivors. There thus appears to be a generic problem which must have a generic cause. If the majority of children emerging from Japanese prison camps suffered trauma late in life, two explanations come to mind:

- The severity of prison camp-life trauma left lasting negative impacts unmitigated by peaceful post-war conditions.
- Camp-life rendered postwar adjustment traumatic. The child, emerging from the camp, could not properly adjust to a normal environment.

Both could, of course, play a role. Happenstance is always a factor. A very young child could well have endured camp without confronting traumatic events, and yet, for various reasons, have struggled after the war. A teenager might have witnessed torture, but in post-war life may have been able to place this trauma behind themselves. Whatever is the case, a distinctive term seems appropriate, and in more recent literature the term “camp syndrome” has appeared, as in Rudy Kousbroek’s 1992 essay titled *Het Oostindisch kampsyndroom* (‘The East Indies camp syndrome’).

From a legislative viewpoint dominated by the need to prove cause, the second explanation presents a significant problem, calling to mind the objections

raised by Kousbroek (1992): the so-called trauma betraying not wartime suffering but a “narcissistic victim’s mentality.”

In considering the post-war adjustments children had to make, age of the child clearly plays a dominant role and for the remainder of this discussion I somewhat arbitrarily make a distinction between those born before and after 1934. In the case of boys, that birthdate entailed removal from their mothers and incarceration elsewhere. I avoided that fate, but that sword of Damocles hung over my young head and haunted me for years. In our overcrowded camps we were acutely aware of this recurring threat, as the eleven-year-olds were rounded up and marched out of the gateway to an unknown destination. It is this younger group that I focus on. For girls, a different dynamic applied: they frequently had to shoulder care-giving burdens, including scarce food provision and discipline for younger siblings. This group of children emerged from the camps without any normal childhood experience whatsoever.

Two interesting questions regarding these youngsters are as follows:

- What sort of creatures were we, (younger) children, when the camps, our bamboo cocoons, released us to the world?
- Why did some youngsters overcome their past?

Both are difficult to answer in the absence of documentation and reliance on memories.

Our memories are not like films, that can be rewound, frame-by-frame, and yet those are the only manifestations of an individual’s reality. Thanks to the nineteenth century invention of photographs, I know what I looked like as a child, and when confronted at age seventy with an unfamiliar image of myself at the Institute of War Documentation (*‘Instituut voor oorlogsdocumentatie’*) in Amsterdam, I instantly identified myself as the subject. This provides a very superficial and therefore misleading image of our past as a physical being. Psychologically speaking we are only a bundle of subjective memories. Only memorable incidents from the distant past remain in my memory, and then heavily veiled by the impact of later events. We can only see our distant past through a mist. But recurring nightmares provide a glimpse of past trauma and ingrained fear could even affect our exaggerated emotional reaction to purely fictional accounts that happened to remind us of our past.⁶

I return to the first question: how would an unbiased observer, or a psychiatrist for that matter, view us in September 1945? The only documented, contemporary, objective assessment, I have been able to find is the testimony by

⁶ Seeing the Disney film, *Dumbo*, after the war, dissolved me in tears.

Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Reed-Collins made at the Tokyo International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE).⁷

He had visited the camps in Batavia, today's Jakarta, a month after the war's end, (when conditions had already improved), with the objective of assessing the humanitarian challenge awaiting the Allies. At the Tokyo trial he reported his observations regarding the condition of civilian men, women, and children. With respect to the last, he stated:

Signs of starvation, of malnutrition, some had the appearance of children who had grown up as plants grow up when kept without light. The bodies of many were emaciated and they had the pallor which one associates with repeated attacks of malaria. I was told that the majority suffered from an intense fear of the Japanese guards to the camp. I think this was due not to any brutality shown by the guards towards the children but due to the beatings which the mothers had received. The children were at first generally silent and were very slow to laugh. (IMTFE 1946, 13,541)

Among the women, many of them mothers, he noted distinctly aberrant behaviour, a psychological condition significantly worse than that of the men.

These observations were deemed irrelevant to the objective of the Tokyo trials and therefore were not pursued. The trial sought to convict war criminals for past crimes and ignored the potential lasting legacy of their crimes. One can infer from this that the future of the former child prisoners, once restored to normal civil life, could be taken for granted. This view can also be implied from the PhD thesis of D. van Velden.

In 1963, van Velden, a teacher and fellow internee in my camp (POW 00198), defended her PhD thesis describing in extensive and highly detailed terms the civilian prison camps. Given the successful, wholesale destruction of documentation by the Imperial Japanese Army, her work in gathering whatever documentary fragments were available throughout Southeast Asia constituted a *tour de force*. Her 627-page thesis enjoyed an astonishing five print-runs.

Van Velden (1963) only sought to explain what had happened in psychological and socio-historical terms. Her lengthy chapter XII is devoted to the psychological reactions of internees. She discusses the social interaction between internees and the Japanese staff on the one hand and relations within the community of internees on the other. The word "child" is mentioned hundreds of times, but only within the context of their negative influence on the adult camp populations. Children were a burden. She does not use the word 'trauma', nor

⁷ International military tribunal for the Far East: transcript of proceedings, 23 Dec. 1946, pp. 13,481-13,613.

does she speculate about the future of internees. An unwritten premise held that the children, being malleable, would recover, provided that the parents were able to resume normal life.

It may be instructive for me to attempt an explanation of the development of my trauma to counter the above mindset. Although every individual's story is unique some common threads exist.

7. My traumatization

I survived the prison camp ordeal in better shape than many children through luck, starting with the fact that I benefited from having three women looking after me and providing a source of security, when traumatic events overtook us. Many mothers were burdened by the care for a number of children.

I emerged from the camp as a reasonably healthy seven-year-old, but nevertheless, being only familiar with the severely constrained, claustrophobic prison camp-life and daily fear — fear of hunger, and of Japanese soldiers and their unpredictable behaviour, fear of another horrendous train ride like the one I had survived, fear of separation from my mother, and fear of distraught, angry women in my house. I possessed only two things: a leaky air mattress and the garment I wore. I was utterly ignorant of a multitude of commonplace things, too numerous to mention. The only persons I related to were the three women of my immediate 'family'.⁸ The other hundred or so women and children who shared my house remained nameless but competed for space and food. My world consisted of a night-time sleeping space, and the short, fifty-foot stretch of narrow city road in front of our dramatically overcrowded house. On that road we spent hours lined up to be counted twice, sometimes thrice a day. The garden where clothes always hung to dry was out of bounds. Most of the time we waited for something to happen.

I sensed no shortcomings because I did not know what I missed in life, the sole exception being food — bland, tasteless, inadequate. Food like air is essential for life. Food also precipitated recurring fear and strife and on one memorable occasion was denied for three days. Only food really mattered. This was my world.

Making acquaintance with my father constituted my first dramatic encounter with normalcy. The Japanese army of occupation had forced him out of our house when I was three-and-a-half years old, and he turned up one-and-a-half months after I celebrated my seventh birthday. To me he was an utter stranger.

A father's absence is not that unusual, but our circumstances added emotional baggage. We had no idea where he had gone nor what he had endured, aside from an unpleasant incident with a Japanese soldier that cost him his teeth.

⁸ I use the term loosely. It includes my foster grandmother and my mother's close friend.

He had no idea what I, or my mother, had suffered. A cloak of silence fell over our three-and-a-half-year separation — lost years — while I had developed, physically and mentally as young children do, but within the limitations of the camp. Postwar family reunification, quite regardless of other considerations, presented a novel societal challenge.

Nobody pondered this problem, and no one thought of documenting any of this. The adults entered the future with the advantage of a memory of prewar relationships, even in some cases of being able to resume something resembling prewar life. They had the luxury of choosing to forget the war.

We children could not forget the war: it had shaped us. I emerged from camp having no idea about the rudiments of civil existence that would confront me. I had to learn to be part of a normal family life and to fit into normal civic society. Within months of leaving a prison camp I suddenly found myself among strangers in an institution called 'school', a strange, alien environment, among children and adults who had no idea whence I had come, knew nothing about my past, did not speak my language, and with a world view totally alien from mine. We children were confined to desks in a classroom which offered me predictability in its prison-like routine and which I much preferred to the chaos of the playground, setting me at odds with my fellow classmates for whom playground break offered joyful relief from the classroom.

The teachers, with their narrow focus on academic performance, were no help. For them, solely concerned with classroom discipline and the curriculum, my presence caused no comment. The playground only concerned them if an accident or a fight occurred, and I avoided the teacher's attention by staying out of trouble.

On our school playground the children displayed skills that I did not possess, like catching, hitting, or throwing a ball and riding a bicycle. I therefore sought refuge from shame and humiliation by isolating myself. I feared the playground. Thus, by the time I turned eight years old, I acquired a behavioural pattern setting a precedent for future challenges. I chose activities designed to hide my social shortcomings inherited from my camp days, and to avoid conflict. By the time I was twenty-three years old, I became conscious of this oddity without understanding its genesis. Upon being awarded my Rhodes Scholarship, I felt like a fraud for never having participated in team sports, and I vowed to take up rowing in Oxford, which I did with great success, but this glimpse of self-awareness went no further.

Primary school only occupies a limited part of a child's day, but at home I also felt alienated. I developed no close school friends to share my free time. Family weekend activities resumed in the form of my parents' pre-war entertainment pattern. This left me cold because they offered me no bridge to school friendships. I tellingly had no regrets leaving South Africa as a thirteen-year-

old. As a teenager in Canada, I finally succeeded in finding companionship with other boys my age, but they never shared my home life.

My mother remained the constant in my existence and the exclusive focus for advice and emotional support while I became my father's helpmate around the house. By the time I left home to study abroad, the emotional chasm between me and my father had not healed.

The exceptionally tragic, violent death of my mother, a year after my leaving home, changed everything. The conflicting emotions this unleashed were overwhelming because of a combination of circumstances: concern for the fate of my ten-year-old, motherless brother, empathy for my father who had witnessed the ghastly accident and, worst of all, outspoken condemnation of my father's remarriage plans by a family acquaintance, unfamiliar with our past.

In Keilson's (2005) terminology, I had suffered another traumatic sequence. Living on my own in Oxford as a quasi-adult, while suddenly feeling orphaned, I made seemingly innocuous decisions, with no thought of consulting my father, with profound consequences leading me, step-by-relentless-step into a social labyrinth, increasingly more distant from my roots, from which I did not escape until my divorce, a quarter of a century later. Shame on account of my social ineptitude, which I had first felt in primary school, now haunted me in adult life.

And in this way, the privations brought about by my three-and-a-half years in prison camp, during a period when a young child undergoes rapid development, laid a defective psychological foundation for addressing the radically novel challenges of my subsequent, turbulent post-war life. I suffered trauma not from terrible things I had witnessed during those wartime years, but from my inability to adjust to peace-time conditions. Many of my fellow campmates fared far worse than I did. The statistics speak for themselves.

That I did not fare worse I owe to luck, starting right after my family's postwar reunion. My parents did not divorce. They made no attempt to remain in a country on the brink of revolution. Their decision to immigrate to Canada rescued me from boarding school, and a major house-move one year after immigration rescued me from a bad friendship.⁹

That I recovered to the point that I can write this essay is due to a couple of developments. Firstly, the dawning realization that my first wife suffered from her own difficult, disrupted youth, and that the relationship problems were not solely mine. Secondly, the realization that opinions I harboured about relationships at the time of my first marriage had been an absurd manifestation

⁹ The boy who befriended me in our new home was eventually incarcerated for armed robbery with violence.

of my distorted social attitudes. Most important, however, was my good fortune in remarrying a woman who had a sound common sense and helped me escape from my self-imposed social labyrinth.

8. Conclusion

By the time a child is seven or eight years old, the social environment has already left a powerful imprint on its psyche, constraining the child in its need to adjust to new social environments. There is truth in the aphorism attributed to Loyola: "Give me the child until he is seven, and I will show you the man."

The impact of the residential school system on children who grew up in First Nations communities can also be described as sequential traumatization as defined by Keilson (2005). In this case, the child had to live through the following traumatic steps: a) separation from the mother, b) abrupt subjugation into a totally alien society at residential schools, and c) reintegration back into their original communities.

I am told that there is an enduring widespread legacy of trauma. This imposes a cost not only on the First Nations community but also on the State. Finding a remedy is only possible when the cause, nature and scope is better understood. So, what can be done? I would recommend two things:

- Attempt to define in statistical (and therefore anonymous terms) the degree and extent of traumatization for a defined cohort from a given school, for instance.
- For those members of the cohort who appeared to have developed into functioning, healthy adults in spite of their residential school history, identify the circumstances that rescued them.

What good would this do? Surely a key objective must be to attempt to help sufferers with recovery. They, like the NEI 'camp-children', were no doubt all saddled as youngsters with fear, alienation, and shame.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Boudewijn, on the left, standing with an unnamed younger companion from the same house by the water supply just inside the front yard fence of our overcrowded bungalow (110 occupants). Photo courtesy Beeldbank 52021 WO2 – NIOD. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 2. Another youngster in our camp. Both pictures were probably taken by a Eurasian photographer, who remained at liberty, and entered our camp shortly after August 23, 1945, when we heard that the war had ended. Photo courtesy Beeldbank 6058 WO2 – NIOD. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 3. Indoor scene, Tjideng Camp: probably one of the original inhabitants to judge by the fact that they still had furniture. Photo courtesy Beeldbank 52039 WO2 – NIOD. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 4. Boys at work (including a family friend, 12 years old) at Si Rengo Rengo, Sumatra. Photo courtesy Beeldbank 51942 WO2 – NIOD. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 5. Kampong Makassar. Photo courtesy Beeldbank 52063 WO2 – NIOD. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 6. Kampong Makassar, a work camp outside Batavia. These barracks were located in a prewar coconut plantation and were first used to house male prisoners of war prior to shipment elsewhere. In early January 1945, women and children began to be moved here with the intention that they would provide food for all other internment camps in Batavia. Peak population 3,500 women and children. The combined population of the other Batavia camps grew to 16,400 women and children. No food was produced. Photo courtesy Beeldbank 56853 WO2 – NIOD. Reproduced with permission.