

**An account of the Talbot family journey from Chinwangtao
to the Weihsien POW Camp in March 20th 1943**

Written by Ida Talbot after the war, based on her diary entry of March 27, 1943, and
edited by Christine Talbot Sancton in March 2013.

Dear Freda,

I am afraid I have been compelled to allow a week to lapse before writing, as I have been extremely busy. Huge quantities of diverse furniture were heaped in piles at various points in the courtyards and alleys and I managed to scrounge a table, a couple of chairs, rough stools and planks of wood which will later, I hope, be made for shelves.

Let me get back to the journey from the starting point: it was long, monotonous and arduous after a very long and dreary wait at Chinwangtao Station. It was not long before we had exhausted our small talk and we were not allowed the distraction of talking to the porters, booking clerks etc as they were not in evidence. In fact, no one paid any attention to us, which is quite unusual for the normally inquisitive Chinese peasantry. The Chinese travelers just behaved as though we were not there. We were joined at the station by an American missionary with his wife and son, looking most pathetic with their few belongings and looking so thin and pale. How mistaken we were by their appearance.

Suddenly we all perked up as there seemed to be a rippling movement. We knew that the time of departure was near because this ripple was caused by the arrival of some officious-looking Chinese minor officials who ordered us to place our baggage in piles and then to stand by them. When this was done, the leader shouted in a harsh voice whether there were any cameras, radios, etc. in our luggage. And yet he seemed to be relieved at our concerted “no” and passed the luggage.

We had a terrific reception at the mines. At Linsi, Mr. Walravens, Dufrasne and Kelsey brought a huge quantity of food. It was so unexpected that we were speechless and very touched, and the parting was very tearful. Then at Tongshan, Bill Gunn, Grace Hill Murray, Vera Dutoff and the Ducuroirs came laden with 28 boxes of foodstuff as well as cigarettes, tinned milk and biscuits. The Japanese Consular Official who accompanied us from Chinwangtao was a particularly sympathetic man, looking extremely spruce and smelling of perfumed soap. He tried to be helpful and Jock Allan knowing that I could speak a smattering of Japanese asked me to interpret. Very haltingly I asked the Consular Official if we could take this vast quantity of food on board and he agreed providing he could examine the boxes. It was only perfunctory, of course, and with everyone’s “face” satisfied, the “cargo” was put on board and again farewells had to be made. It was even sadder this time, for we were leaving Britons behind.

I am afraid I dozed whenever I could, for Christine slept quite a lot. The two older children managed to occupy themselves playing with the others along the aisles. If they got too exuberant some parent soon told them off. We stopped at the various stations where more internees came aboard and as these people were not as fortunate as we, it was generally agreed to share our food

with them. At Changli almost a hundred priests from the Dutch Lazarist Mission joined us. The sight of so many men heartened us, for until then the women and children were in the majority.

We had to change trains in Tientsin and, of course, where one of our dreaded ordeals had to be lived through. The usual vast horde of porters were conspicuous by their absence and in fact we were roped off from the general public, and the Japanese sentries made sure that the public would not be contaminated by contact with us. I believe Mr. Joerg came to the station to see how things were going. I was too much tied up with the children to have even noticed him, but providentially, after we had painfully de-trained ourselves and our luggage, for some unaccountable reason the authorities decided that after all they would shunt the train we had vacated on to the Tsuipui line, so once more we were back on the train.

We arrived at Tsinan 2 hours late, thereby missing the express connection. We managed to change trains in record time, for on this occasion the authorities had recruited men to shift the baggage from one train to the other whilst we “helpless women” looked after the arriving pieces. When the train started moving we had to pick up threads again, some of us to feed our babies, others to re-settle the old folks and still others to amuse the older children. The train was badly overcrowded. The priests and nuns stood packed like sardines in a tin when suddenly the train stopped moving in a very desolate valley and we were surprised to see a squad of Japanese soldiers march out and proceed to do P.T. It was a blind, of course, which we didn't realize at the time as apparently the rails further along had been blown up and we had to wait for the repair work to be completed before we could proceed.

We arrived at Weih sien at 7.30 and tumbled out as best we could and again we lined up beside our luggage, with Christine still sleeping peacefully in her moses basket. Those Chinese who were allowed onto the platform could not resist coming and having a peek at the baby sleeping so confidently in the wicker basket. After a great deal of fuss and palaver we were told to pile into busses. The one I went on kept breaking down but I wasn't worried as it was full of hefty priests. It was quite dark when we arrived at the Assembly Camp and we were made to stand in a large courtyard for what seemed to be an age, being counted and recounted when at last to our relief we were told to go into a largish building. The priests were allocated the ground floor and we, the families, upstairs. I think the single men were assembled on the attic floor. What a bedraggled, untidy sight we must have been. The Tsingtao contingent had arrived the day before and acted as hosts and served some sort of hot meal for us. I don't know how they managed it.

Sister Eustella made her first appearance and she seemed to us like a gift from Heaven. She borrowed blankets, mattresses etc. and as soon as we were given permission, we made a rush for the thick Japanese mats, called tatamis which we piled up against one wall. Sid and I managed to get two and by putting the two together we five managed to have a rest. The sleep was fitful, as throughout the night babies could be heard whimpering, older folks talking and others snoring. What a medley of noises and smells.

The following morning, after a cold wash in an icy wash place and toilet, we had breakfast of millet and bread. There was a roll call, the riot act was read out to us and then the rooms were allocated. This was an American Campus for Chinese students and therefore, apart from the Assembly Hall and the Executive buildings, the sleeping quarters consisted of long rows of

single room terraced dwellings. We had been given two connecting rooms, as we are five in number, in Alley 6 which backs onto the playing field and is in front of the bakery and village pump and pump house. The Wallises, Dregges, Joneses, Carters, Barnes and last of all the Marshes are in our row. As Sid has been allocated the first house, he has been made warden of the row. The Ladies latrine is a fair distance away from where we live, whereas the Gents is next door to the Bakery so Sid, in company with most men, with all false modesty laid aside, has to empty the geries each morning. It's hard for him, but for the moment there is no alternative.

Letters and comfort parcels are admissible: the mail is sent out weekly, on Mondays, so we are told. The life is one continual round of chores for everyone. It is hard but then I have no time to be bored. We take Christine with us to the dining room for our three meals. She is placed at the bottom of the table close to the wall to be propped up, and as she is always in her blue coat, she is known as the Baby in Blue.

I have never seen such a congregation of religious folk – so many priests – and as for the nuns, the prettiest seem to wear the veil. The American sisters are extremely jolly, but the Dutch and Belgian sisters are quite subdued and mouse-like. We all eat together in a common dining barn to which we had to bring our own plates and utensils, line up for servings, help ourselves to bread and tea and then seat ourselves. We all seemed to have brought butter, jam and milk and the food was not too bad although it was always sloppy and to my benefit for it was conducive to have an ample supply of milk for Christine. Breakfast was at 8.30, lunch at 12.30 and supper at 6.30.

I forgot to mention that Mrs. Simmie, Louis Ladow and wife and Bill lived in our alley. Louis was very helpful.

The morning after we arrived, as I was coming down the stairs I met the Consular Official who greeted me and asked me if I had a stove. He promised to put my name on the list as only those who are extremely old, or sick or with young babies are entitled to have one. But when we got the stove, we didn't seem to be able to get it going and did not realize this was due to the fact that we were one length of piping short. The Chinese contractor gave us only two instead of the regulation three. By greasing his palm we managed to get a third one from him. This has made all the difference to our lives here, as it solves the problem of making Christine's food, such as cream of wheat porridge etc. and each night we have visitors dropping in for warmth, a chat and a cup of tea.

When the Tientsin contingent arrived, we put Marie and Wendy (*Robinson*) up until they went to live in their one room and when the Peking contingent arrived later, we turned our outer room over to the Hennings. They were friends of my father's (*Jas Jones in Peking*) and quite elderly. We were a little squashed as we five had to sleep in a room intended for one, but in the day time we lived in the outer room. It was Bill (Chilton) who actually asked us to put them up. I know that WBC will climb up to be the leader because he has the personality, as you know, but I haven't seen much of him yet.

Our lodgers left today so we will now be able to straighten things out. The K.U.K. have done a good job, not a thing lost. I wish I had known that I could have brought more useful household articles, such as pails, curtains, fancy plates, teapots etc. I do miss them. I will work on my

promise soon and it will be a humdinger. The people here are full of fun. I am getting more laughs in one day than I would in one year in Chinwangtao.

Please remember me to Will, Olaf, August and yourselves. Thank you very much for your friendship. I appreciate it so much. Without you I should have been extremely lonely and you helped to make my days pleasant and companionable.

Love Ida