

A Prosperous Childhood

Dr. Lin En-Kwei, my grandfather, was born on February 1, 1922, in a fishing village in southern Taiwan. As a child, he accompanied his father to the Dutch East Indies. His father, a cloth merchant, managed a successful business, providing Grandfather with a wealthy and comfortable childhood. At the time, Taiwan was under Japanese rule, and Grandfather attended an elementary school affiliated with the Japanese Consulate in Batavia instead of a school for local Indonesian children. The workload at the small expatriate Japanese school was light, leaving Grandfather plenty of time after class to play around with friends and fly kites.



Returning to Taiwan: Colonial Inequality

When Grandfather turned ten, his father decided to send him back to Taiwan for better education. Because he had previously attended a Japanese expatriate school, Grandfather enrolled in a school where the majority of students were Japanese children. The teaching quality and resources there were far superior to those available in schools attended by most Taiwanese children, thus providing Grandfather with a solid educational foundation.

For middle school, Grandfather attended Tainan Second Middle School, where most students were Taiwanese. Here, Grandfather deeply felt the discriminatory treatment towards colonized Taiwanese, who were treated as second-class citizens despite Japan's 40 years of rule over Taiwan. Many students in the school harbored strong resentments toward the perceived superiority of the Japanese. Students would enforce among themselves a rule that prohibited speaking Japanese in informal settings, with physical punishment for violations by senior-class students.

Reflecting on his teenage years, Grandfather often mentioned two life-changing decisions: his faith in Jesus Christ as his lifelong guide and his determination to study in Mainland Japan, refusing to accept being a second-class citizen forever.

Studying in Japan Amid War

As Japan's militarism expanded and its aggression in China deepened, Western countries increased sanctions on Japan. This also affected my great-grandfather's business in the Dutch East Indies, forcing him to abandon his business in Batavia and return to Taiwan. Although the family's financial situation worsened, Grandfather's family, with the help of a benefactor, managed to support his study abroad in Japan. Grandfather successfully passed the stringent entrance exam for medical school after three years at the preparatory "higher school." Students in medicine and engineering were considered essential wartime resources. This spared him from the battlefield but exposed him to police brutality. As a conscription-age Taiwanese man in Tokyo, Grandfather and his classmates were stopped by police. After being identified as Taiwanese, they were beaten by the officer, reaffirming their status as second-class citizens even in Tokyo.

Surviving the Tokyo Air Raids of 1945

In July 1943, Grandfather entered the prestigious Medical School of Tokyo Imperial University. By this time the Pacific War was nearing Japan's home islands. Grandfather experienced two major Allied air raids on Tokyo.

The first raid occurred on March 10, 1945, when B-29 bombers dropped incendiary bombs over Tokyo. Initially, some citizens tried to extinguish the fires with water, but the flames were uncontrollable and many perished in the inferno. Others attempted to escape by jumping into rivers but were either burned alive or drowned. Grandfather, without hesitation, fled to an open area and barely survived. The next day, he returned to find the city reduced to ashes, with bodies scattered along the way. Among them were families who had tried to escape together, lying lifeless in the same direction, victims of suffocating smoke. His residence was destroyed but, fortunately, a Taiwanese businessman who had evacuated to the countryside offered his house to Taiwanese students, providing them with shelter.

The second air raid, on May 25, 1945, was even more devastating. When air raid

sirens sounded at night, fires had already engulfed the streets. Crowds of people sought refuge in firebreak zones. Along the escape route, incendiary bombs continued to explode, spreading burning oil. Grandfather fled on foot for hours, only stopping at dawn, five to six kilometers away. Once again, his residence was destroyed and even items stored in air-raid shelters were incinerated. As he would later recall, “All that remained for me were the shreds of cloths I wore on my body.”

Heading to Manchuria:

After the air raids, Grandfather was convinced that Japan’s defeat was imminent and feared that, in its final desperation, Japan might target non-Japanese ethnic groups, including Taiwanese, in acts of mass violence. He began planning his escape from Japan to China, which he regarded as his ancestral homeland, hoping to contribute to its future.

Traveling to Manchuria, then a Japanese puppet state, he arrived in Changchun (then called Hsinking) two weeks before Soviet forces invaded Manchuria. Within days, Japan announced its surrender.

The War Experiences of his Siblings

Taiwan was also affected by the war. Grandfather's younger siblings recalled taking early-morning trains to school before dawn, with black curtains hung in the carriages to avoid detection by enemy planes.

At the time, Grandfather's siblings were only in elementary or middle school. Their education instilled in them a sense of loyalty to the Japanese Emperor. They cheered when Japanese fighter planes engaged American aircraft but felt dread upon discovering the wreckage belonged to Japanese planes. When they heard Emperor Hirohito’s recorded announcement of Japan's surrender, they wept alongside the Japanese.

Soviet-occupied Manchuria and outbreak of China civil war

In Changchun, Soviet army allowed the Taiwanese freedom of movement within occupied areas, while Japanese nationals were held as prisoners of war.

However, Grandfather and his Taiwanese colleagues could not roam freely, as battles between the Chinese Nationalist and Communist forces soon erupted. They feared being caught in the crossfire. Instead, they sheltered indoors, scavenging food from Soviet army-guarded warehouses during lulls in the fighting. After six months, they finally left Manchuria, journeying through multiple locations before returning to Taiwan in December 1946.

Imprisonment

A year after returning to Taiwan, Lin En-Kwei completed his medical studies and became a certified surgeon. In late 1949, the Chinese Communist Party seized control of mainland China and the Nationalist government retreated to Taiwan. A massive crackdown on suspected Communist sympathizers began. Grandfather was accused of being a Communist for his activities while in school. He was sentenced by court-martial and imprisoned on the remote island of Green Island for seven years. At the time, he had been married for just one year and had a newborn daughter who became overnight the child of a political prisoner.

On Green Island prison, Grandfather endured forced labor and ideological “re-education”. Among the prisoners were doctors, teachers, and even artists. Despite the physical imprisonment, their spirits remained unbroken.

Grandfather learned Chinese from teachers and witnessed artists crafting musical instruments from scraps and wires. Alongside other imprisoned doctors and under primitive conditions, he performed surgeries and saved lives, including those of the soldiers guarding them.

Siblings Scattered

After Grandfather’s imprisonment, his father passed away, leaving his younger siblings without support. To lessen the family’s burden, a brother enlisted in the military at a young age, and a teenage sister, Lin MinMin, was brought to Shanghai by a family friend. Disastrously, she became trapped there by the Chinese Civil War, unable to return to Taiwan. All contact was forbidden between Taiwan and China, but the family never gave up hope of finding MinMin. It was the daring efforts of the younger brother, Lin Dong-Hsiung – a bomber crew in ROC (Taiwan) Air Force – that brought a glimmer of hope: during a reconnaissance mission over Mainland China, he smuggled a message seeking their missing

sister. This led to a letter from her being sent to Taiwan through an intermediary in Hong Kong. However, the siblings, would not reunite in person until 30 years later.

Forgiveness, and Lifelong Devotion

After seven years of imprisonment, Lin En-Kwei returned to Taiwan and slowly rebuilt his practice as a surgeon, though he remained under surveillance by secret police. Under martial law he never felt truly free, describing himself as “living in the shadows.” Nonetheless, he retained a passion for life, caring deeply for his patients.

As Taiwan entered a new era of democratization, Grandfather expressed gratitude for the guidance of his Christian faith. Yet, he noticed that the Bible used by Taiwanese Christians was written in Romanized script by 19th-century Western missionaries. Hoping to make the Bible accessible in Chinese characters, he spent years translating the phonetically Romanized Taiwanese Bible into Chinese. Over 660,000 words of translation were completed and the entire set of manuscripts was donated to The Bible Society in Taiwan, leading to its publication in 1992. He retired from his medical career at the age of 70.

Conclusion

Dr. Lin En-Kwei passed away on May 7, 2015, at age 93 in Taiwan. Most of his six siblings had emigrated to various parts of the United States. Each of them experienced dramatic changes due to war or subsequent political turmoil, but all seven were fortunate to reunite, continuing to uphold the dignity and pride of being Taiwanese.

When Grandfather spoke of his experiences, he never expressed resentment. Instead, he inspired reflection on what one should pursue in life and what it means to be truly resilient.

May the memory of Grandfather’s family serve as a beacon for all who resist oppression and strive for peace.