

AT ST. JOHN'S DURING THE WAR YEARS 1942-1945

by

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In 1938 Rev.H.Peto, Rev J.T.Arulanantham and Mr. E.M.Ponnudurai came to our home in Singapore to meet my Father the Rev J.T.N. Handy and his brother Mr. A.M. Handy as they had agreed to help raise funds for the College in Singapore. I never for a moment thought that 4 years later I myself would be a student in St. John's College, Jaffna. The Japanese War had begun on 7.12.1941 and within 7 weeks they had overrun Malaya and were poised to capture Singapore. On the 6th of February 1942, just 10 days before Singapore fell, my Father sent my Mother & sisters, two aunts & myself with Mr. A.M.Handv and family by ship to Ceylon. We had to take a circuitous route sailing down the Java Seas and through the Sunder Straits between Java and Sumatra and out into the Indian Ocean to avoid Japanese planes & submarines. Unfortunately our ship which had been bombed earlier developed trouble and we had to abandon it at Sumatra and take a troopship to Batavia & then a cargo boat from there to Colombo.We arrived in Colombo after 21 days zigzagging in the Indian Ocean and learnt that Singapore had fallen. All Colombo schools had closed for 3 months in anticipation of a Jap attack & the schools taken over for army barracks. I and my two cousins who were studying in Colombo went to Jaffna and joined St. John's College.

After Singapore, St John's was a cultural shock. I found that most of the students were barefooted and I soon abandoned my helmet, school bag and exchanged shoes for slippers. All my classmates in Singapore were Chinese with a handful of Indians (Ceylonese came under this category there). All my former teachers were Chinese, wore suits and drove to school in their cars. Here the younger & elderly masters also wore western suits but the national costume was unfamiliar to me and most of them came on bicycles or walked if they lived round the College.Rev.Arulanantham welcomed me and my sister Mrs.Ranee Eliezer joined the staff of the College as well. I was sent to Form Lower V (which was the pre-S.S.C.) and was relieved to see a familiar face of my cousin J.H.Ariyaratnam. I became a boarder in Thompson House & Mr. P.T Mathai was the Boarding master. He was strict and each night after the 7 p.m. prayers, he administered the cane to those who had been truants!!! One of the highlights of 1942 was the opening of the new Centenary Science Block by an old boy of the College, Prof.A.Kandiah, D.Sc (Lond), Prof. of Chemistry at the Colombo University. The building was built by S.C.Samuel & Sons Ltd, whose Chairman Mr. S.C. Samuel was himself an old boy of the Coilege. It was an impressive building and easily the best in any Jaffna school.

1943 was an interesting year for me. I moved on to the senior boarding house- Fleming House where regulations were less rigid. We had the Singalese teacher Mr. C.H.Gunawardene as our House master and later the Rev.A.J.C.Selvaratnam,who oined the Staff as Chaplain. I was selected :o play football for the College XI under he captaincy of Rajah Brodie and the :ollowing year I won my Football Colours. Due to the influx of large number of students from Colombo and other outstations, the College was pressed for finances and Mr. E.C.A.Naratnarajah, the English Master for the S.S.C. form decided to stage plays as a regular feature to raise funds. I remember that I took part in 1943 and in one scene, I am supposed to light a cigarette but am interrupted and have to throw it outinto the class room adjoining the Hall). For the dress rehearsal and two nights the play was shown I was provided a cigarette o light and on all three nights my dorm nates were waiting off stage to catch the cigarette I had to fling!!! The following year some of the younger members of the Staff took part in the plays and my sister Mrs. R.Eliezer was the first lady to act a female part on the St. John's stage.

Till 1943, the College had a Inter-Form where a handful of boys and girls from other Colleges in Jaffna sat for London examinations. A few also attempted to sit for the University Entrance examination and generally one or two were successful. With the formation of the University of Ceylon, it was decided that a two year H.S.C. course would have to be followed with examinations conducted by the University. We had an influx of girls to join these courses from other schools in Jaffna and this necessitated a hostel being provided for them. A section of Mr. E.M.Ponnudurai's house was set apart for these girls next to Evarts Boarding house and Mr. & Mrs. Ponnudurai kept a parental eye on them. Mrs T.Rajadurai & Mrs D.Williams, now in Melbourne, were of this first group.

The War also left its mark on the College. Tywnham Museum was taken over as the A.R.P. Headquarters and Mr. A.J.R. Vethavanam, Education Officer Jaffna and an old boy of the College was the A.R.P. Controller. He had regional Assistant Controllers drawn from other schools and Government Depts. The Scouts and members of the Cadet Corps at College volunteered to be Messengers. Every Saturday morning we were given new Raleigh bicycles, with "A.R.P." armbands and a piece of wooden stick hung round our neck which we were supposed to clamp between our teeth in the event of a bomb attack!!! I remember we all took part in a massive parade on our bicycles when Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, the Civil Defence Commissioner visited Jaffna to inspect defence preparations. I still recall an interesting observation made by an elderly Jaffna man- "Don't worry when the Japanese pilots fly over Jaffna, they will think that our tall palmyrah trees are really anti-aircraft guns camouflaged and will fly away".

Palali Aerodrome was built during this time and R.A.F. men stationed there. Food rationing was a nightmare for those providing food to us Boarders. We had only two rice meals a week and for the rest of our meals we had to depend on various flour preparations that Mr M.S.Thambithurai provided. Pittu, parripu or keerai curry was basic with fish. Sunday night delicacy would be rice or thosai with meat curry and Staff would join us for dinner and sit at each table to make interesting conversation- this was a good innovation.

Strange as it may seem, we never felt the paucity in our diet as those in the boarding houses had good fellowship and we all looked forward to the end of term concerts. Fifty years later, the present generation will hardly believe that fuel, sarees, crockery, textiles and milk foods were all rationed. Every adult & child was given a ration book on which the basic items like rice, flour sugar & as and when available, curry stuffs were issued weekly. As expected a roaring blackmarket in these and other scarce goods became prevalent and the house of the Manager of the co-op store was invariably the centre of such activity. Needless to say, a Co-op Inspector was in much demand in the matrimonial scale as he could obtain most of these scarce goods!!

1944 was an interesting year for the College as we became Inter College Athletic champions beating our close neighbour and rival St. Patrick's College, who had been champions for the past ten years. There was added spice to this victory as Mr. P.E.Rajendra, our Athletics Master had left St. Patrick's recently and he wanted to score a point over them.

Some of the outstanding athletes who helped achieve this were from my class (H.S.C.-first year) Victor Benjamin champion Hurdler, M.Dharmaraja & N.Pooranalingam the sprinters, A.R. Rasiah the high jump and pole vault champion and P.Tharmalingam the long jump champion. 'It was a thrilling finish to the end with St. Patrick's and us neck and neck each with 73 points till the very last event of the day- the 4x440 yards relay race. The first three laps our rivals led with Lucien Kiel their captain taking the baton-but our anchorman P.Tharmalingam ran the race of his life and pipped the Patrician at the post-What excitement & pandemonium in the Johnian camp." (extract from College magazine)

In the Inter-House Athletics meet, Swimming was introduced as an event in 1943 due to the pressure of the students who had come from Colombo. Having been used to swimming pools in Singapore our "pool" in Jaffna was indeed novel. All participants and supporters were marched to the Jaffna lagoon. Participants and judges were rowed out in boats further into the lagoon and there we saw that the local fisherman had stuck poles into the water and cordoned off

three lengths with rope- 100, 50 and 25 yards respectively for Senior, Intermediate and junior events. Each group was told to jump overboard into the water and cling on to the starting rope!!! The boatmen were our "life-guards". There were no preliminaries. For each group about 10-15 of us took off and first one to cling on to the rope at the other end was the winner. In 1943, the 3 Kanagasabai brothers from St. Thomas' College swept the board in all three groups. The next year with their departure, I won the senior event. The end of the year culminated in my being appointed Captain of Handy House. I considered this one of the significant events in my life-to captain a College House named to honour my grandfather the late Rev.C.C.Handy. It now appears that I had become not only the first Handy to do so but also the last.

This year also witnessed the retirement of Mr. A.G.Charles. He was one teacher who had been on the staff of the College when my grandfather was Headmaster and he used to relate interesting events in their time at College and as his parishioner at Christ Church Jaffna. Mr. Charles was taken in procession round Kandy Road in a decorated Mercedes Benz car belonging to Mr. Hitler Kandasamy of Valvettithurai, and back to the College where the whole school, staff and Old boys had assembled, for a public farewell. A gift was presented to him & Mrs. Charles and I recall that he donated a sum of Rs 2000 towards the A.G.Charles Geography Prize. Mr. P.C. Gaussen the Vice Principal who came to St. John's from Persia (Iran today) returned to U.K. as the tide of war had turned and Mr. S.S.Sivapragasam was appointed Vice-Principal.

We returned to College at the beginning of 1945 and learned with dismay the exodus of many of our H.S.C teachers. Messers E.C.A. Navaratnarajah (English) to Jaffna College, K.Nesiah(History) to St. Thomas' College Mt. Lavinia D.C.Arulanantham (Chemistry) and V.Sivaguru (Physics) to the Examinations Dept. in Colombo. A few students left to other Colleges in Jaffna & others to Colleges in Colombo. The Principal soon remedied this situation with the arrival of Mr. A.Rajendra to the Arts-division and Messrs J.G.Thambayah (Chemistry), Mr. Sam Somasunderam (Mathematics) and most welcome of all, Miss M.Abraham from India for Physics. She was the first lady to teach in the H.S.C. class at College. We had an excellent Zoology teacher Mr. P.J. Balasing who left in 1945 to become a Lecturer at Andhra University.

This year I became a College prefect which gave me added responsibility in the boarding administration and freedom from regulations. N.Pulendran was Senior Prefect & resided in Flemming House. One of the duties was to read the lessons and take the collection at the College Sunday evening services. I enjoyed immensely the Carol services and whenever I hear the "Hallelujah "chorus I recall the first time I sang in the-choir trained by Miss Kelk and Mrs. Ferdinands with Miss Harriet Lawrence at the organ. The first Choir dinner after the carol service was introduced during our time with the venue alternating between the two colleges. What a lot of scrambling for places as a boy and a girl were placed next to each other under the watchful eyes of the teachers and masters!!! The S.C.M. was also very active and I remember the inter-college seminars that I attended at Jaffna, Uduvil Girls and Union Colleges and the Camp at the Ashram with its austere surroundings and the Chapel where we all had to sit on mats. The jolly laughter and humour of Sevak Selvaratnam in such surroundings was indeed a contrast.

In June 1945 the war in Europe was over and with liberation came freedom for many of the countries that suffered under the Nazi regime. The winds of freedom were also blowing over Asia and with the Labour Government in power in U.K., Sir Stafford Cripps came to India to discuss Dominion status . In Ceylon too the Soulbury Commission- arrived to examine political reforms and we heard the "Fifty-fifty" cry raised by the Tamil leader Mr. G.G.Ponnampalarn. As students we used to go the Jaffna Fort ramparts and listen to him as well as the leftist leaders like Dr. N.M.Perera. Dr. Colvin R. de Silva and Pieter Keuneman. All their policies have gone overboard in retrospect.

Although the war in Europe was over Ceylon became the headquarters of SEAC Command under Lord Louis Mountbatten to recapture Malaya and Singapore. It would have meant heavy losses in lives not only of the invading forces but also civilians by the heavy bombing of cities before the invasion took place. The dropping of the atomic bomb saved the lives of millions of

people in Japanese occupied territory. For me personally it meant that my Father and so many of our relations and friends in these places would now not risk being killed through Allied bombings. My time at St. John's came to an end in 1945 and I returned to Singapore, and went to the university there.

Here I would like to digress and recall my class of 1942. Up to this time, only two or three students entered the University each year. But from this class 14 entered the University of whom the most outstanding student was Victor Benjamin who passed the H.S.C. in 1945 in the 1st Division with Distinction in Botany & Chemistry. He won a College Exhibition and at the 1st M.B. exam was awarded the Jeejeebhoy Scholarship by the university. He was an outstanding surgeon and obtained the Master in Surgery of the Ceylon University and F.R.C.S. (London). 4 others passed out as doctors and 9 did an arts or Science degree of whom 4 were in the Sri Lanka Administrative Service- N. Pulendren becoming Food Commissioner. 3 did Banking- M. Dharmaraja and myself became Managing Director & Assistant General Manager respectively of Hatton National Bank and K. Gunaratnam an Assistant Governor of the Central Bank and recently Chairman of the Export Development Board. J. H. Ariyaratnam became Deputy Registrar of the Jaffna University. I do not think that in any other time, one class produced so many who were to become future leaders at the national level.

Although I spent only 3 years in St. John's College, I shall always be grateful for the time I spent there as it taught me so many values in life that would have escaped me in Singapore. May it continue to flourish and mould future generations.