

## WHAT WAS INTERNMENT LIKE?

Further Recollections of Sister Mary Oliva, C.S.M.

The question is often asked, "What was living in an internment camp really like?" It is impossible to give a satisfactory answer as it meant different things to different people. To a minority it was like living in hell. To several people, especially to the missionaries, internment meant that it was given as an opportunity for spiritual and intellectual growth. In a very short time, accordingly, classes were arranged for the study of languages, philosophy, and innumerable other subjects. There were times in the early days of our Baguio Camp life when it almost seemed as if we were living in a Conference Center.

Internment did actually mean hardship, being cut off from all communication with the world, and deprivation of many things which hitherto had been considered necessary for everyone. This is one point, probably, on which all internees would agree.

Sister Isabel, O.S.A., and I were resting out at Marycroft, Bangsan, when we received a note from Sister Columba saying "The Japanese have ordered all foreigners to be at the Bontoc Mission by 5 P.M. on Monday, otherwise Father Nobes will be shot." Accordingly, we packed swiftly and took the hour's walk back to Sagada. Thus, on May 24, 1942, we began life in internment in Bontoc.

For our breakfast on that last morning in Sagada we had a superb meal. The portion of Scripture appointed to be read was the story of Elijah being able to live 40 days on the meals provided for him by the ravens, and I remember wondering if it was <sup>was</sup> an omen that we should be able to do the same. Bishop Wilner, 14 missionaries, six Sisters of St. Anne who were refugees from China, and our three selves composed our group. The nine Sisters occupied the little two-room cottage while the others were scattered in different houses. The military prisoners were at the far end of the Compound, and some of them were sick. Our men felt sorry for them and shook hands with them. The Japanese saw them do it and slapped both their faces and those of the prisoners. That was when we first began to know "what internment was like."

On June 16 we were moved to Camp Holmes, Baguio. Our stay in Bontoc had not been too unpleasant for we had the daily Mass and our generous Sagada Igorots brought us supplies of food. We and our few possessions were taken down in two trucks. Before the War the camp had been occupied by 50 members of the Philippine Constabulary.

Our arrival there is unforgettable. In the afternoon our truck halted and we descended, half smothered in dust. The internees greeted us warmly, but one realized their dismay at seeing some more people who would need food to be provided from their already scanty rations. "Look at the clothes of those Sisters - they won't be able to work in those things!" We were shown our quarters in the women's dormitory, and since I had been sick most of the way down the trail I was glad to lie on the floor, which at least was stationary. Then they urged us to go downstairs and take a bath. "There is a bathroom which is quite private. No one can possibly see you." I felt rather skeptical as to the privacy. The other Sisters departed, leaving me to enjoy the blissful quiet. After a short time as I lay there with closed eyes some of the internees returned and I heard one of them say, "You must go down to the bathroom and see the thinnest Sister you ever saw. She is almost a skeleton." This was obviously Sister Isabel, O.S.A.

We stayed in the women's dormitory overnight and then were moved to what was formerly the Constabulary Mess Hall. One of the corners at the far end was thickly populated with cockroaches crawling up and down the wall in an endless procession day and night. The other side of the wall had been the kitchen, which accounted for their incessant travels. After watching them I wondered how and if they managed to get through the wall to the kitchen, but my scientific interest was not sufficiently strong to make me ask Miss Ashcroft or Dorothy Sims who were sleeping near them to let me exchange places with them.

It rained the first night we were down there and the water came through the ceiling onto our beds. Fortunately we had brought our little tin wash basins from Sagada and we were able to catch the water as it dripped on us as we lay on top of our double-deckers. All went well till we went to sleep, turned over, and then there would be a loud crash as the basins fell on the cement floor.

One of the internees came in the next morning and said "How I envy you your privacy!" I replied "Do you call sleeping with 14 people privacy?" "Oh," she answered, "of course everything is relative here."

Within a few weeks we were moved below the terrace to what had been a tennis court. Five Maryknoll Sisters occupied one shack, six Sisters of St. Anne another, and we three, with Mrs. Bartter and Miss Taverner, what had been the barber's shop. I swept up one and a half large kerosene tins of hair before it was ready for occupancy after a good scrubbing. It was made of tin, was dry, had no roaches, so we were fortunate. We had only one very bad typhoon: the rain came rushing in under the door, the water was nearly up to our knees, but we lay on our cots and took turns bailing it out. Father Mandell was very kind and used to come down barefoot with our food from the camp kitchen. There were 500 of us, 50 of whom were children. The men were housed in one dorm,

the children in another with their mothers, and the unmarried women in a smaller building. In the early days in Baguio the Japanese were very strict with regard to what they called the "commingling of the sexes." If they saw a man sitting next to his wife they would go up to him and slap his face and the man would move away. This was very hard on the families and they felt the separation greatly. The Japanese became more lenient the last year we were in Baguio, and the families were allowed to live together. Then the difficulty came with regard to floor space, and a difference of two or three inches seemed almost a life and death matter.

The Japanese were wise to let the Americans take charge of the running of the camp as a general rule. Everyone was required to do at least two hours' work daily. The Sisters were assigned the rice cleaning. It was not hard physically except that it involved eye strain to separate the tiny stones from the rice. There was one shipment of rice from Japan which had quantities of small coal mixed in the rice sacks. The coal had been put in the hold with the rice and the sacks had burst. It took many days to separate the coal from the rice and some of the women talked of going on strike. "You have no guts," said Miss Whitcome to me when I refused to go on strike. But I knew that we should get the worst of it if we did go on strike.

In the early days of our internment I used to go down to the children's garden on Sundays with a book. It was open to adults in the early afternoon and was situated below the Guard House. But the peace and quiet did not last long for soon one heard loud moans, groans and cries while the poor Igorots were being beaten. Yes, that was what "internment was like."

One day when I went topside to fetch our lunch from the kitchen I was struck by the death-like silence of the Camp. Usually there was a great deal of shouting and noise of the children. When I saw one of the internees lashed to the flagpole the quiet was understandable. The Japanese were flogging him with a long snake-like whip. Suddenly there came a loud roar like that of a wounded bull and they only beat him harder. He evidently was badly hurt and one of the missionaries asked them to stop. "Go away," the Commandant answered, "or we will do the same to you." But Dr. Nance, who had been practicing in China before the war in the Philippines and was afraid of no one, stepped up and ordered them to stop, which they did at once. It seemed that Mr. Mount, an internee who came from Tennessee, had been smuggling in liquor and had been selling it to the other internees. The Japanese had discovered a bottle and questioned him, but he denied any knowledge of it and also refused to give the names of his clients. He was a Roman Catholic, and the Maryknoll Sisters tried to help him both spiritually and physically after he was carried back to his bunk.

In the early days of the war Bishop Binsted was in Manila and sent money to be divided among us as well as our other

missionaries. The Japanese allowed a store with supplies of fruit, eggs, sugar, etc., to be opened. This helped us with our meagre diet and was a disciplinary weapon for them when their war news was discouraging and also when two men ran away: they closed it at such times for a few weeks.

Sometimes Camp Holmes seemed like living with the Swiss Family Robinson. The men were mostly experts along their own lines, and were wonderful and met each emergency as it arose with complete disregard as to the labor and strength involved. The sanitary arrangements became impossible as the Camp plumbing was never intended for so many people. The men dug another cesspool and made tin boxes into which the soiled paper was dropped and removed daily by the sanitation detail. This was the favorite work as the men ran down the hill with the truck as fast as they could, met an Igorot, and learned the latest war rumour or received a secret note before the short legs of the Japanese could overtake them. But after a few weeks the Japanese realized what was happening and insisted on their going slowly.

After a few months people began to get on each other's nerves, and then it was jealousy with regard to the bananas. It was said that certain people were always given the best ones. This made the cooks furious, so they made tin boxes for them: when the would-be receiver stepped on one out came a banana regardless of type or size.

The men's dorm was next to the room where there was a piano. One of the men loved music and used to practice the same pieces day after day, making the identical mistakes. He really played very well, but it affected the men's nerves to such an extent that one night one of them sneaked out of bed and cut all the leathers of the piano. The next morning people were rather shocked at the vandalism, but were grateful for the relief to their nerves. The piano was not repaired till shortly before we were taken down to Manila.

It seemed as though internment was hardest on the women with children, for aside from food scarcity they were living where every sound carried and when the children were being put to bed the shouting and screaming were deafening. They were becoming very undisciplined, for if a mother tried to correct her child another mother would interfere and she just had to let matters drop.

There were two very attractive young English women, red-headed Mrs. Bird, who was an artist, and dark-haired Mrs. Macmillan. They each had a little boy of about four years of age, with hair to match his mother's. Neither Derek Bird nor Robert Macmillan could pronounce their r's, so they were Dewek and Wobert. When Christmas came the Sisters of St. Anne set up a simple little crèche outside their shack, and children loved to come down and sing carols. But alas, after a few nights the little Bambino disappeared. Mother Ursula came to the rice room and asked everyone if they had seen the Bambino. The mothers were all shocked, exclaiming "Oh, no, my

child wouldn't do such a thing - he couldn't dream of taking it." This went on for about a week and then one morning when Mrs. Bird was making Derek's bed she found a little lump of wax under his pillow. Of course she realized what it was and questioned Derek. She whipped him and put him to bed for the day, but he was unrepentant. "I loved him and I wanted him," was all he would say, and she couldn't get him to apologize to Mother Ursula "'cause I'm not sorry."

Mrs. Bartter cut out a pretty picture of a house from the Ladies' Home Journal and hung it on the wall to cheer herself. When Dewek and Wobert came round to pay their respects as usual, Wobert asked "Do they weally have houses like that in America?"

One day when I was coming down from the rice room I saw little Francis Gray, about three years old, and two little companions sitting in the ditch. When they saw me they looked mysterious, and rather ill at ease, but I didn't think much of it till I entered the barber's shop. Then I said to Sister Columba, "I think Francis Gray is up to mischief; he is sitting in the ditch with two other little boys and they seem to have a box of something." So she went out and questioned them. Mrs. Gray had had a box of prunes left over from their Red Cross supplies and had put it on a high shelf for safety. Francis got a chair, reached the prunes down, and called his little friends to share the booty. Sister Columba promptly took Francis up to his father to confess. The last she heard was, "O Daddy, make it an easy one this time!" Actually I think Father Gray was rather pleased that he had a little son who had shown so much clear thinking and ingenuity: he had carefully waited till his mother had gone to her vegetable detail before he took the prunes and called his friends.

The bright spots in internment were our daily Eucharists, meditations, the Divine Office, the two sets of Red Cross boxes from the U.S.A. and Canada. There was also a weekly entertainment, for we had a bandmaster, a dancing teacher, and a good deal of artistic talent.

Food began to be still more scarce before the end of our stay in Baguio, and I think that the most embarrassing moment of my life was when I went into the women's kitchen to reheat our breakfast coffee for lunch and my sleeve caught in a woman's frying pan in which two eggs were cooking. Down went the eggs to the floor! The self-control of the owner of the eggs was perfect, and one would have thought that she only had to go to the A. & P. to buy some more. This was at a time when eggs were scarce. We were able to return them the next day, but meanwhile what had happened to the lunch of the previous day?

People very wisely began to grow vegetables, but I concentrated on flowers. There were some nasturtiums which had seeded just on the other side of our fence. Nellie McKim asked permission of the Japanese for us to dig them up. This was granted, and what followed was one of the times when I wished I were a cartoonist. A

soldier stood at the fence with a gun. The fence was nothing but broken rusty wire lying on the ground over which I could have stepped at any time of day or night without anyone knowing it.

Towards the end of our stay in Baguio we could see that the Japanese were beginning to lose the war and were rather edgy. They kept up a search for radios, etc., and one day demanded everyone's knives. As I was returning from the rice room I felt suddenly depressed for the first time, and I thought how terrible it would be if they really took every last thing we had and shut us up where there would be no light nor air. Then I felt suddenly cheered, remembering "No matter what they take they can't take God away from us." Then followed the sure conviction that many people, including our Sisters, were praying for us.

And so the years passed. My flower garden flourished and was pretty, some people coming down daily to see it. I was rather surprised, and it was not until the war was over that I realized that it was a good cover for those who were en route to the Hospital to listen to the secret radio of which few people knew the existence.

Soon after we were brought to Baguio Mr. Shafter, our Sagada High School Superintendent, brought me some statues of the Holy Family and one of St. John the Baptist, about one foot high, which he had salvaged from a Filipino officer's hut. Many people came to see them and I had placed them on the shelf behind the cots.

On December 28, 1944, we were ordered to pack all necessary belongings and be prepared to leave early in the morning. I hated to leave the statues behind, so wrapped them in an eiderdown quilt which Mrs. Bartter had loaned me. We were given no clue as to our destination; some optimistic souls thought we might be going to a seaside resort, though the more realistic thought we were being taken to Manila. But it was good to be going elsewhere after two and a half years in the same place. As our trucks passed through Baguio the streets were deserted, though some women stood at their doors looking terribly frightened and shocked as though we were being taken to our deaths. And there was more truth than poetry in that!

As the day progressed it became hotter. The driver was sitting with his back to me, but the other Guard came over and asked me to hold his gun as he wanted to go to sleep. He moved to the other end of the truck and promptly did just that! I must confess that for a few minutes I was tempted to shoot him, but I had never held a gun before, and even if I were successful there were four semi-invalids who would be unable to escape, and there would be a terrible reprisal.

At midnight the truck slowed down, the Guard jumped out, and the door of a courtyard closed behind us. There were exclamations of horror, for we had been taken to the notorious prison of Bilibid as it is called.

It was not until the next day that we discovered how filthy the place was, but the men warned us not to sleep on any of the mattresses as several of the American military prisoners with contagious diseases had died on them. They were thrown over the wall the next morning, but the night we arrived some of us decided to sleep on the roof. We were too weary to undress, but Sister Columba arrayed herself in her long white nightgown. Within less than an hour it began to rain and Sister arose and was standing up looking for a drier location. Father Gray noticed her movements and with his customary politeness asked, as he turned his flashlight full on her, "Sister, can I do anything for you?" "Yes," said Sister decisively, "turn off that flashlight." Everyone was too sleepy and tired to laugh.

Next morning I heard the doctors scolding the Japanese just as if they were bad schoolboys, saying they didn't know how they dared bring a lot of women and children to such a filthy, unhealthy place. They ordered them to send in soap and all necessary sanitary equipment. I felt rather frightened, expecting every moment that they would be stabbed with bayonets, but the Japanese were quite pleasant and said that they were only carrying out orders from headquarters and would supply us with necessities as soon as possible. The internees set to work so energetically that within 24 hours the building was comparatively clean. We established ourselves in an alcove downstairs with the Sisters of St. Anne. This had been the sick bay of the American prisoners before we came in.

*mouldy*  
There was little food in Manila and we were given rotten, slimy vegetables and <sup>old</sup> moldy corn. We discarded the worst of the vegetables and cleaned the remainder as well as we could. For a few days we used to remove the weevils from the corn, but then, realizing that they were the only protein we were likely to receive, we left them alone.

When the men were unloading the trucks they threw my eiderdown to the ground with the result that some of the limbs of the statues were badly smashed. St. John the Baptist lost an arm. I didn't know what to do with the poor little figures, so I just stood them on a packing box downstairs. Sister Columba was quite distressed next day when she saw the children hugging them and carrying them around the courtyard. "Sister," she said to me, "you will have to dispose of those statues!" The children had been without dolls all through concentration and were delighted with those poor maimed statues. There was no way of burying them, so I had to smash them into small pieces. Mrs. Bartter saw me trying to do so and said "I don't believe your Superior realizes what a hard task she has given you."

Within about a week several people including Sister Columba, Sister Juliana and Sister Isabel were laid low with dengue. There was a long row of tiger or torture cages at the end of the courtyard and some of the patients were moved into them. They were, of course, well ventilated, but the sick were very visible to the passers-by. In one was found a pencilled note pinned on the cage, saying "We, the

undersigned, broken in body, mind and spirit, rely on you who come after us to avenge us." We did, though probably not in the way the poor boys intended, for we used one of the cages for our daily Mass, and of course some of us prayed for them daily.

At the end of the courtyard just under our windows were five graves of our soldiers. They must have been buried soon after the beginning of the war, for the grass growing over them was very thick, even in that poor soil. I used to make my meditation there after breakfast, and somehow they were a great comfort.

One of the internees was a very fine woman who had volunteered to do all the Hospital washing throughout the year. This must have been a very repulsive task, for the equipment was poor and most of the patients had dysentery. After the war she became the governess of General MacArthur's little boy. Shortly before we left Bilibid she came up to me and said "I have been watching you Sisters for a long time, and you have something that the rest of us don't have!"

The food situation became worse, and even a teaspoonful of peanuts cost 50 cents. Though we didn't mind being hungry we were dismayed to find that we couldn't keep our minds off food for more than a few minutes at a time.

During the last musical entertainment someone began "Go down Moses," and the refrain "Let my people go" burst forth with all our hearts and souls. It must have been silently re-echoed by the prisoners on the other side of the wall. The guards kept walking around us and I wondered if they understood what we were singing. Communication with the Military prisoners was forbidden, but somehow notes were often dropped on both sides of the wall containing cheering news of the war.

Then it was discovered that the water was poisoned. This was not surprising for some of the internees were refugees from China and were acquainted with Japanese war tactics. The men dug wells for several days and finally found water that was safe when boiled, though somewhat unpalatable.

The end came swiftly. We had been so saturated with rumors and counter rumors that we no longer believed them until things actually happened. One morning the guards filed silently down the stairs and out of the door without any formal leave-taking. I felt sorry for them, for they had only been carrying out orders, and as one of them expressed it a few days earlier, "We are going to be mown down like grass."

General MacArthur must have known that the High Command had left orders that all Americans were to be liquidated on the Tuesday, for he rushed the troops into Luzon 36 hours ahead of the supplies, which was almost unprecedented for him. The first American tanks rolled into Manila on Friday evening and on Monday morning we were all lined up to greet General MacArthur and his staff. All through internment people had planned how we would cheer, shout, sing and dance when "the Americans return to get us out." Instead of that



we were literally numb with joy when the General and his Aides walked through the dormitory. Sister Columba was, I think, the tallest in the long line, and perhaps it was for that reason that General MacArthur stopped when he came to her, shook hands, and said "It has been too long."

Internment under the Japanese was replaced by internment under the Americans until we left the country and were repatriated. There was a great difference in that we now had the plentiful American Army food and always permission to leave the Camp for a few hours after we had obtained an Army pass.

In the evening we were rushed by jeeps to a shoe factory outside Manila because there was a report that Bilibid was to be bombed that night. That first ride in a jeep is unforgettable. Ashes falling on our faces, the streets thickly lined with Filipinos shouting "Victoree, Victoree!" And I said to myself, "It was worth going through Concentration for this!" Snipers were shooting at us, but we reached safety and were given a space on a gallery over the main floor where the sick soldiers were being given oxygen and other treatment all night. It was all done so quietly, but it was terrible not to be able to help.

Next morning we had to stand on line for two hours waiting for breakfast while the ravenous soldiers were being fed. They had been given no food for 36 hours. I couldn't stand any longer and perched myself on a jeep while they kept on arriving from the front. They looked exhausted and very grimy, and it was one of the many times during the war that I felt glad their mothers could not see them. Some of them enquired after their buddies and it was sad to see their faces fall as they were told they were dead.

The bomb rumor was a false alarm and we were taken back to Bilibid that afternoon, only to find that the Filipinos had rushed in during the night thinking we had left permanently and had looted everyone's possessions with the exception of an electric razor.

Sister Columba and I wanted to ascertain the condition of St. Luke's so one day we obtained a pass and walked there. We were relieved to find that it had not been bombed, but the birds had taken it over and had left their calling cards in great abundance all over the altar and benches. Sister Columba said "I have always loved that verse in the 84th Psalm, but it will never appeal to me again." ("The sparrow hath found herself a nest ... even Thy altars.")

Little Barbara Trimble was very religious, and when her mother and grandmother were invited out to dinner one night she was very upset as there would be no one to hear her prayers. A soldier happened to be present and heard her crying. "I will hear the kid's prayers," he said. Accordingly, he came round that evening. Next day he told her mother, "Barbara certainly got me down last night. She prayed for everyone she knew and then she began to pray for 'the dear brave soldiers,' and I started to cry like a baby and had to rush out and leave her."

We continued our Masses in the torture cage just within the outside prison wall, and each day one wondered while the mortar guns and machine guns were firing whether that particular Mass would be our last. But somehow I felt as if the Archangel Michael were standing there to protect us.

Very early one morning a bomb exploded just outside our end of the building. There was complete silence for a few minutes and I wondered if everyone except myself had been killed. So I asked "Are you all still alive?" To my relief Mother Ursula answered, "Yes, we are all here."

We came to know the soldiers very well and many of them used to ask us for prayers before they left for the front. They loved the children, who of course reminded them of their own at home.

Soon we were moved to Santo Tomas University to join the Camp which had been there since the beginning of the war. As we waited that afternoon for the jeeps to take us there, to my amazement I suddenly realized that I did not want to leave Bilibid. And why? I was only too glad when we left Bontoc, Baguio, and later S. Tomas. It was because this was the place where we had suffered the most, and though it sounds morbid and sentimental, I did not want to leave the soldiers' graves forsaken. Actually this was crossing an unnecessary bridge, for when we moved out the U. S. Army moved in.

However, to S. Tomas we went; in a few days our processes for repatriation began. After they were satisfactorily accomplished we boarded the S.S. Ebberle, accompanied by a convoy of five ships. Manila Bay was full of sunken ships, and one wondered how it would be possible for the sailors to steer. But our imprisonment was ended. Deo Gracias.

We landed at San Pedro, California, on May 2, 1945.

And now, what was internment like? To some it was hell, to others a time of spiritual growth and intellectual development; to all it meant hardship and deprivations. But in the last analysis, like life itself, it was what you yourself made of it.

One of the great blessings of internment is the friendships which came into being being there. Some of them are lasting. To this day Robert and Derek are close friends. Alleluia.