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**Introduction**

The infamous Death Railway, originally called the Thai-Burma Railway, was a horrendous part of World War II history and Japanese Occupation of much of Southeast Asia. Built on the blood and sweat of civilian labourers and Allied prisoners of war, the railway earned its nickname from the suffering of tens of thousands forcibly drafted by the Japanese Army to work on its construction. An estimated 90,000 civilian slave labourers and more than 12,000 POWs perished in the process of building the 415 km railway over 15 months from 1942 to 1943.

This book is a historical narrative of the lives of people affected by the Death Railway. A collection of first-hand accounts of survivors of the railway and the chronicles of families left behind in Malaya during the Japanese Occupation is long overdue, and this work attempts to fill the void, and at the same time arouse interest among the public in the episode and how it affected countless lives. More importantly, it is hoped the book will serve as a record of the Asian civilian survivors’ accounts of the period1 and complement, as it were, the published accounts of prisoners of war veterans.

1 Some of the information in this book came from an earlier article published in *The Planter*, Vol. 82, No. 969, in December 2006.

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Revisiting the Death Railway

The first section of the chapter discusses the methodology utilised in gathering first-hand information from survivors of the Death Railway. The chapter then looks into the establishment of the Death Railway Association and events that took place over the years.

After the withdrawal of the Japanese army from the occupied territories in Asia in August 1945, substantial information in the form of publications, film documentaries, and photo images from the Australian War Memorial websites and war veterans on the ravages of war as well as human suffering and casualties during the Death Railway episode, were made available to the public. However, apart from the well- documented experiences of the POWs during their captivity, the coverage of the large-scale conscription and exploitation of Asian workers has been, for the most part, inadequate. Although several authors (themselves POWs) and researchers have written about the brutality of the Japanese soldiers, the hardship and suffering of the ‘coolies’ received scant attention in the local media or in books authored by historians, researchers and journalists, possibly due to the unavailability of records and personal accounts. Initially attempts were made to keep records of the workers, but in the course of time, these disappeared. It is also probable that the railway tragedy was never regarded as part of Malaysian history as it occurred in Thailand, despite the huge workforce from Malaya forcibly recruited to build it. If not for the revelations of war veterans of the Allied Forces (British, Australian, Dutch and American POWs) in their diary accounts, the episode may have been brushed aside. While in custody, these POWs had, at the risk of severe punishment and torture if discovered, written in their personal diaries, which were carefully hidden in the attap roof of their huts, accounts of the atrocities, oppression and violence unleashed by their Japanese captors.

Survivors who returned to Malaya did not pen memoirs of their experiences as most of them were illiterate. A handful

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relied on their memory to share with their families the horrors of captivity and the toll on their lives. Most of them in later years could not remember the month and year of their departure to Thailand. The present generation whose elders were involved in the construction of the railway have not been able to provide adequate and reliable information passed down by the survivors who probably did not want to recount their experiences and cause more agony for themselves and their families. And those left behind in the custody of aged grandparents claimed they had lost one parent or both. Interviews conducted between 2005 and 2013 with the small number of survivors who were mostly in their late 80s, revealed fading memories of their experiences. Had they been interviewed much earlier, a wider corpus of accounts could have provided more crucial evidence. Despite these problems, this work serves as a record of the few remaining survivors’ ordeal in captivity and the legacy of these Asian workers (particularly from pre-independence Malaya).

The first-hand stories narrated by the survivors, including my late father K.N. Sellappah, are supported by vital information published by POWs and researchers on the railway episode and events which occurred during the Japanese Occupation. Families (including the author’s) left behind provided accounts of their lives during the period of hardship and despair in occupied Malaya.

In addition, credible information on the sluggish economy, unemployment, anti-Japanese uprising and turmoil in Malaya during the occupation was, provided by my maternal uncle,

S.K. Vachiravel, who worked as an interpreter cum intelligence officer for the Japanese Railway Administration in Malaya from 1943 to 1945. Upon the return to British rule, S. K. Vachiravel was engaged as Inspector of the Special Branch Unit in Taiping, Perak. At the priviledged audience granted me, the late Tan Sri Yuen Yuet Leng had acknowledged that, in servivice, he was one year junior to the former in the same unit in 1950 and that he held high regards for Vachiravel’s outstanding committment and

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leadership qualities. The veracity of Vachiravel’s detailed reports on the volatile security situation in the peninsula was vouched by Tan Sri Yuen, who, prior to retirement was Deputy Director of the Special Branch in Bukit Aman, Kuala Lumpur. During the interview, the late Tan Sri Yuen also provided information on the landing, swift advancement and occupation of Malaya by the Japanese forces and events leading to the communist insurgency thereafter. Yuen and Vachiravel had known each other as colleagues in the police force in Taiping, Perak in the early 1950s.

The dearth of material on the savagery of the hundreds of thousand labourers in the construction of the Death Railway was evident in India as well. In contrast to the voluminous accounts published after India achieved independence in 1947, extolling the heroic deeds of the Indian National Army under Subhas Chandra Bose and of Captain Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan, leader of the women’s wing (Rani Jhansi Regiment), hardly anything was written about the plight of their countrymen, including Indian labourers from Malaya and Burma and others (Burmese, Thais, Indonesians, Malays, Chinese and Eurasians), who built the railway to facilitate the advancement of the Indian National Army (INA) to the Burmese border to battle the British forces in India.

## Death Railway Association

The Death Railway Association movement was initiated by a group of Malay survivors of the Death Railway in the state of Kelantan, where the Japanese army landed on 8 December 1941 to begin their advance and occupation of Malaya. Registered in 1958, the association’s top priority was to seek compensation for the suffering and loss of lives. In 1960, the association’s secretary, Mohamed bin Daud, reportedly said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Malaya) had informed the association that “the Japanese government was still considering the appeal for

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compensation”.2 He further stated that if the overdue payment was not resolved expeditiously, the matter would be referred to the International Court or the United Nations.

Four years later, in 1964, the association wrote to the then Prime Minister, Tungku Abdul Rahman, seeking $101 million in compensation for the victims.3 The association claimed to have received an assurance in writing from the Prime Minister that the Japanese government, in order to sustain good relations with Malaysia, was keen to settle the matter of compensation to the victims.4 In his letter, Tengku had also urged the association to leave the matter to him to be resolved amicably in due course. There was some hope when the incumbent Chairman (En. Mohammad Noor Tahir) said a delegation from the association would meet the Prime Minister over the negotiations on behalf of nearly 30,000 survivors of the Death Railway episode. However, thereafter there was no indication of a positive outcome from the negotiations initiated by the government.

In a notice dated 2 January 1992 issued by the incumbent Secretary, Abdullah bin Hj. Salleh calling for the fifth Annual General Meeting to be held on 18 February 1993 in Machang, Kelantan, the group was given the official name of the Association of Former Forced Labour and Heritage to Burma 1942-1946 (Persatuan Bekas Dan Warisan Buruh Paksa Ke Burma 1942-1946). In another notice dated 27 December 1992, the Secretary stated that compensation for victims would be channelled through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland. He urged members to settle their outstanding annual subscriptions for the period from 1987 to 1992.

2 “Kerajaan Jepun Sedang Menimbangkan Rayuan Ganti Rugi, Kata S-Usaha Kesatuan”, *Berita Harian*, 6 August 1960.

3 *New Straits Times*, 26 August 1964.

4 “Tengku jamin bekas buroh paksa akan di-bayar ganti rugi”, *Berita Harian*, 3 March 1965.

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It is not clear what the association’s membership fee and annual subscription were since its inception. Some sources claimed that 10,000 or more victims from various other states had travelled to the association’s office in Machang to register. Others from Nilai, Negri Sembilan claimed they had registered with the association more than once and paid between RM100 and RM300 per person in membership. Based on information from 39 survivors and their next-of-kin from Kedah, Perak and Pahang interviewed in 2005, there were individuals and groups who posed as representatives or proxies of the association to collect membership fees and issued forged receipts. These survivors and families never received their membership cards. It is believed that when the pioneers in the association’s committee had passed on, it caused a leadership vacuum, which led to the association becoming dormant for a long period.

Moreover, disgruntled members began to lose enthusiasm and confidence due to the delay in settling their grouses.

## New Blood, New Hopes

In October 2004, another group of Malays (mostly next-of- kin) from Terengganu and Pahang revived the association and relocated its office from Machang, Kelantan to Kuala Berang, Hulu Terengganu. The newly formed committee managed to generate some publicity, including a report in the *New Sunday Times* (NST) in 2004 headlined “The pain is still there, 60 years on”. The article portrayed some of the survivors in their twilight years residing in Terengganu and included brief accounts of their experiences in the railway construction in Thailand and Burma. The committee’s spokesperson had stated then that fresh avenues for negotiating compensation were being explored and urged victims or their next-of-kin to register with the association. The application forms were to be endorsed by either the Penghulu, District Officer, Magistrate or Commissioner of Oaths and submitted with a membership fee of RM50. These

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were then vetted by the head office before membership cards were issued. Following the drive for membership, the author was appointed Liaison Officer for Negeri Sembilan in June 2005 to ensure victims or their next-of-kin from the west coast states were not left out. Since the association had not established branches in other west coast states, applicants from as far as Kedah and Johor had to travel to the author’s residence in Seremban to get registered. Only survivors who could provide tangible evidence of their experiences in Thailand or Burma were accepted as members while next-of-kin of those who returned but later died, had to produce evidence such as death certificate and related history of engagement, to be entitled to register. By 2007, my register alone had 420 members, most of them next-of-kin of survivors.

Those who claimed to have lost loved ones in Thailand or Burma were not accepted as it was felt this might open the floodgates for many without reasonable evidence to make dubious claims and take advantage of the exercise. In 2006 and 2007, after being appointed to the central committee the author attended meetings in Kuala Berang, Terengganu, which provided opportunities to meet elderly survivors from the east coast states to obtain first-hand accounts of their experiences. At these meetings, important items on the agenda were often bypassed, such as total membership fees collected, bank deposits and expenses incurred by office bearers on their occasional travels to the government’s administrative centre in Putrajaya for discussions on compensation. The subject matter of those discussions were not disclosed either. The appointment of a lawyer to represent the association was mentioned but no particulars were disclosed. In early 2007, there were rumours of ‘agents’ in Kelantan and Terengganu appointed to entice people other than victims or next of kin in rural areas to register, with

the ill-intention of raising funds for the association.

In mid-2007, the association’s Annual General Meeting was held in Kuala Berang and was mainly attended by members

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from the east coast. A Japanese businessman was invited to attend the meeting; his presence was to impress upon the members that the Japanese government was represented at the meeting. In fact, the businessman was in the state to study the feasibility of importing cow dung to Japan for processing organic fertilisers. The Chairman’s opening address painted a rosy picture of the association heading in the right direction to resolve the issue of compensation. As before, two pertinent items on the agenda – the total membership that could reflect the total fees collected and the financial status of the association – were not mentioned. The audience fell for it, hook, line, and sinker. Towards the end of 2007, a complaint of alleged misuse of funds by the Chairman was lodged with the Registrar of Societies in Kuala Terengganu, followed by police reports. Following the complaint, the ROS ordered the association to submit its accounts. Subsequently, in January 2008, the Chairman was charged in the Magistrate’s court with embezzlement and barred from holding any position in the association. The ROS suspended the activities of the association. Three years later, some of the association’s former committee members formed a pro-tem committee. An advocate was appointed to claim membership fees from the suspended association for the purpose of settling outstanding debts. The new committee also assured the ROS that it would abide by the association’s constitution. In the third quarter of 2011, the association was re-registered as Persatuan Kebajikan Dan Warisan Buroh Binaan Landasan Keretapi Siam Ke Burma 1942–1946 Malaysia. The association was launched by the then Mentri Besar of Pahang,

Dato Sri Adnan Yaakub.

## Meeting with Japanese Ambassador

Following news that a large sum had allegedly been paid by the Japanese government in 1990 in compensation for victims and was held by the Finance Ministry, the committee with the support of Bukit Gantang Member of Parliament from Perak

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State, Datuk Seri Mohamad Nizar Jamaludin, arranged to meet with the Japanese Ambassador at his Embassy in Kuala Lumpur on 3 January 2013. However, the meeting was attended by the Second Secretary to the Ambassador, Takaharu Suegami, who informed the committee that the Ambassador and the First Secretary had left for a meeting in Tokyo.

The Japanese official told the committee that apart from two ships donated to the Malaysian government in 1967 (which were to compensate for Japan’s intrusion into Malaya) he was not aware of any compensation paid to Malaysia for the victims. He also could not confirm if there were records of labourers conscripted by the Japanese for the railway construction in Thailand and Burma. He assured the committee he would refer the matter of compensation to the Ambassador and the issue of labourers’ records to the National Archives in Tokyo.

A month-long re-registration exercise carried out in January 2013 resulted in only some 300 people signing up of the 400 members who had registered in 2005 and 2007, as some passed on while others had lost interest in the association. However, soon after that, rifts developed between the top officials, with the Vice-chairman and Secretary accusing the Chairman of misusing membership fees. At an emergency meeting called by the Chairman, he vowed to make amends and compromise with his critics. But the situation soon became untenable and was referred to the ROS. Finding sufficient evidence of malpractice, the ROS deregistered the association in late 2013. Once again, the members’ trust and hopes of seeking justice on compassionate grounds were dashed. Attempts by some committee members the following year to seek ROS approval to restore the association failed, putting an end to the association and the issue of compensation.

## Government’s Stand on Compensation

In a letter dated 3 June 2010 to the association’s head (which was not revealed to members), the Ministry of Human Resources

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referred to the Malaysia-Japan Agreement dated 21 September 1967 signed in Kuala Lumpur by former prime minister Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra and Taisaku Kujima (Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Japan to Malaysia). Under the Agreement, which came into force on 7 May 1968, Japan had committed to provide products and services to the value of M$25,000,000 over a period of three years, to be utilised for the construction of two boats as compensation to the Malaysian government for the “unhappy events” during World War II. On their part, the Government of Malaysia had agreed that all questions relating to compensation payments were considered settled between the two governments. This settlement was to enhance friendly relations with the aim of promoting economic cooperation between the two countries. The letter also stated that the implementation of the ‘Look East Policy’ (advocated by the then and current Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad), for securing long-term benefits from Japan should not be bogged down by issues of compensation other than what had been acknowledged in the Agreement. Much later the Ministry of Foreign Affairs allegedly informed the Ministry of Human Resources that the government would not stand in the way of any individual or organisation claiming compensation (either directly or indirectly) from Japan, as long as the government was not seen to be supportive of the effort.

## Death Railway Interest Group

Since 2013, there has been renewed interest and enthusiasm among a group of Indian Malaysians comprising mainly the next-of-kin of those who worked on the Death Railway to revive history. The main objective of the group was to document the experiences of the remaining survivors of the railway and to generate public interest and ensure their legacy survives time and future generations

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**The Death Railway Interest Group (DRIG), established as an NGO in 2016,** has, in collaboration with government agencies, private sector and Department of History, University of Malaya, organised workshops, symposiums, forums and seminars for the public. While these events have attracted interest among the public and support from the media, it is unfortunate that more than 70 years since the episode, the handful of survivors aged late 80s or early 90s were unable to recollect and relate events from that episode with accuracy due to declining health and memory loss. Moreover, their narratives did not cover most of what had occurred along the KRA Isthmus and the Siam/Burma railway lines.

Under the **chairmanship of P. Chandrasekaran**, the group has advocated for a memorial to be erected in Kanchanaburi in Thailand to commemorate the Asian workers (especially from Malaya) who died constructing the railway. The memorial would also allow Malaysians, especially the next of kin, visiting Thailand to pay tribute to those who perished.

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**Beginnings of the**

**Thai-Burma Railway**

“The Thailand-Burma line from Ban Pong to Thanbyuzayat, and the Kra Isthmus line from Chumphon to the Pakchan estuary, both of which were built during the Japanese occupation of the areas, mark the realisation, in greatly changed circumstances, and for very different purposes, of projects which date from earliest days of railway enterprise in South East Asia.”1

The construction of the Thai–Burma Railway, which claimed the lives of more than 100,000 Asian labourers and an estimated 18,000 prisoners of war, and caused permanent debility and impairment to tens of thousands others within a period of some 40 months time (from June 1942 to August 1945), was one of the most bleakest enterprises on the Southeast Asian front during World War II.2

After neutralising American sea power at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on 7 December 1941, Japan embarked on the simultaneous invasion of the Philippines and Malaya on

1 Charles A. Fisher, “The Thailand-Burma Railway”, *Economic Geography*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1947, p. 85.

2 Beaumont Joan & Andrea Witcomb, “The Thai-Burma Railway: Asymmetrical and Transnational Memories”, in Christina Twomey and Ernest Koh (eds.), *The Pacific War: Aftermaths, Remembrance and Culture*, London: Routledge, 2015, p. 67.

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8 December 1941, and British Borneo in January 1942, subsequently taking control of Burma from the British and the East Indies/Indonesia from the Dutch in March 1942.3 The reason for the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia was primarily economic as Japan needed to secure imports of rice from Indochina, British Burma and Thailand and oil and bauxite from Sumatra (East Indies). When the Japanese forces advanced into Southern Vietnam in July 1941, the United States responded by freezing Japanese funds.4 Other countries including the Netherlands followed America’s lead by banning exports of oil and bauxite to Japan.5 As a result, it became increasingly difficult for Japan to purchase these commodities. Faced with economic embargoes by Western powers, especially restrictions on supplies of oil, iron ore and steel, the Japanese adopted aggressive militaristic retaliation to re-obtain these resources from Western colonies in Asia where the main obstacles were the British and U.S. navies based in Singapore and Pearl Harbor respectively. The objectives were to first destroy Pearl Harbor and occupy Singapore. The fall of Malaya and Singapore, in particular, was one of the most stunning military defeats for the British, caused mainly by the weakness of the British military forces in Malaya that were unprepared to resist the Japanese.6

3 Following the aerial and naval onslaught on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on 8 December 1941, the Battle of the Coral Sea (4-8 May 1942), in an area between Australia, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, was a major naval battle in the Pacific region involving the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) against the naval and air force of the United States and Australia. Six months after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor and one month after the Battle of the Coral Sea, the victory over the IJN by the U.S Pacific Fleet at the Battle of Midway (4–7 June 1942) marked the end of Japan’s naval expansion in the Pacific theatre of World War II.

4 Jonathan G. Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937-1941*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, p. 153.

5 Greg Cashman and Leonard C. Robinson, *An Introduction to the Causes of War: Patterns of Interstate Conflict from World War I to Iraq*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007, p. 129.

6 Refer to map in Figure 2.1 on the invasion of Malaya.

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Beginnings of the Thai-Burma Railway

Japan’s conquest of Southeast Asian countries (except Thailand) and the final thrust to fulfil its disastrous mission to take the Indian sub-continent from the British required it to navigate a major geographic obstacle, which was a route by land via Thailand to Burma. The Japanese needed a land route via Thailand into Burma to mobilise their army from Singapore as the Bay of Bengal was too risky for Japanese vessels which would be easy targets of American warships, aircraft carriers and submarines stationed at strategic locations along the eastern shores of India. The Japanese army had to traverse a 415km course over treacherous terrain – from a trig or spot height of 255 metres in Ban Pong District to 1,805 metres near the Three Pagoda Pass, gradually lowering to 708 metres close to Thanbyuzayat.7 Consequently, Japan decided to build a railway linking Thailand to Burma. Japan already had a large army based in Burma, and was aware that the British had in 1910 surveyed a possible rail route linking Bangkok to Kanchanaburi and beyond to Thanbyuzayat in Burma. However, it had to be abandoned in 1912 due to potential risks of hazardous terrain, endemic diseases and the heavy monsoon rains. Additionally, the project would take at least 10 years to complete.8

However, in early 1941, a team of Japanese surveyors and engineers inspected a similar route and reported to their headquarters in Japan that the railroad could be completed in five to six years but would require a colossal workforce of hundreds of thousands. The Japanese were of the opinion that the British-designed route over 415km was obviously the best option for the supply of logistics to its army base in Burma. Japan then set a deadline for the completion of the entire railway,

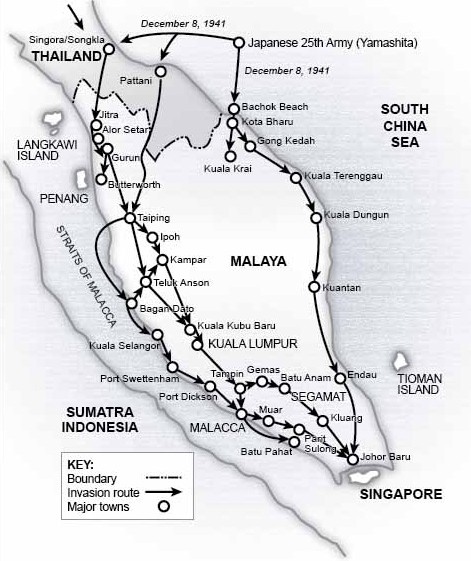
7 Gerwyn Elidor David Lewis, *Out East: In the Malay Peninsula*, Shah Alam: Fajar Bakti Publications, 1991, p. 96.

8 See Swapna Bhattacharya, *India-Myanmar Relations, 1886-1948*, Kolkata:

K.P. Bagchi, 2007, p. 147.

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**Figure 2.1: Japanese Invasion Routes in Malaya (8–10 December 1941)**

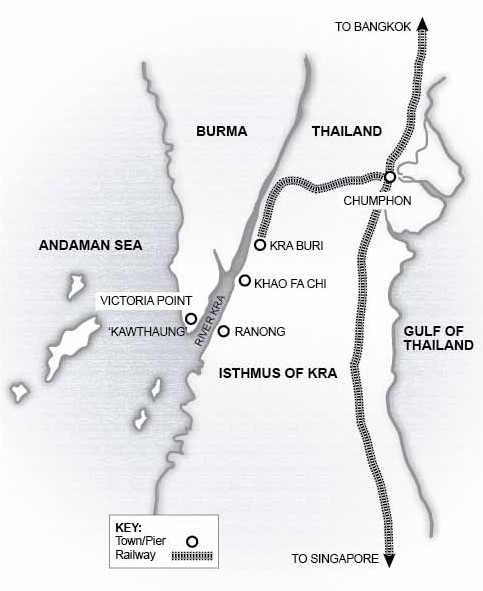
which at all costs was to be completed in August 1943.9 This was later revised to December 1943 but the project was completed ahead of schedule by using slave labour and POWs, and the railway was fully operational on 25 October 1943.10

9 Paul H. Kratoska, *The Thailand-Burma Raiway, 1942-1946: Documents and Selected Writings*, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 3.

10 Anthony A. Evans and David Gibbons, *The Illustrated Timeline of World War II*, New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2012, p. 182.

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Beginnings of the Thai-Burma Railway



**Figure 2.2: Kra Isthmus Railway**

## The Other Railway Line

In fact, the Japanese had planned to establish two railway lines. The Thai–Burma railway was not the only route to link the two countries. The first attempt was on a shorter route in the Isthmus of Kra, called the Kra Railway, linking Chumphon town (close to the Gulf of Thailand) on the Bangkok–Singapore railway line westward to Khao Fa Chi village 92 km away on the smaller

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River La Un near Ranong, some distance from the town of Kra Buri.11 As this line became unsafe due to its exposure to Allied bombing, the terminal was later moved from Khao Fa Chi village to Kra Buri. From this terminal, supplies could be loaded onto smaller boats to Ranong (facing the Andaman Sea), and trans- shipped a short distance across the River Kra estuary to Victoria Point/Mae Kaw Thaung – a town at the southern tip of Burma. From here and beyond, British-constructed roads connecting Thanbyuzayat were considered by the Japanese army to be less vulnerable and more efficient for moving civilian and military supplies while the much longer and hazardous route (main line) was under construction. Estimates of the total workforce involved in the Kra railway vary between 60,000 and 120,000 (including Thai workers on contract), under the supervision of 1,200 soldiers (Japanese and Korean)12. According to Professor David J. Boggett of Kyoto Seika University, Thailand, a Thai resident, (Sabiang Chuchat, son of the wartime village headman) whom he met during his visit to Kra Buri in 2004, said the old wooden buildings still standing near the river were built by the Japanese as warehouse and storage facilities.

Some reports state that work on this stretch commenced in June 1942, six months after the Japanese army arrived in Chumphon in south Thailand, with the deployment of the first batch of 20,000 voluntary workers from the east coast states of Malaya, and was completed in about 18 months. Other reports claim the rail line was under construction from July 1943 to November 1943 and was in operation for 11 months despite occasional air raids by Allied bombers from November 1944, which caused temporary disruptions due to damage to the rail line, its bridges and important piers for loading goods onto boats plying River Kra. The major assault in March 1945

11 Rawson, R. Rees, “Two New Railways in South-East Asia.” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 108, No. 1/3, 1946, p. 85.

12 Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: A Social and Economic History*, p. 183.

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sealed the fate of the Kra railway permanently. The damage was so devastating that the line was completely disbanded and the steel rails and equipment were hurriedly moved to other parts of the main Thai-Burma line. It is believed that a large number of sick and wounded labourers were left behind while the rest were moved to work on the main line. Though some Western commentators have claimed that POWs were used in the construction of this line, there is neither any evidence to support this nor any published diary account from the POWs to confirm it. In addition, the surviving labourers from this construction line did not recall meeting any POWs during their long months of hardship.

In anticipation of the huge numbers of POWs and construction workers, Japan had earlier deployed two of its regiments totalling 12,000 troops to the main project sites. The 5th Regiment based at Thanbyuzayat in Burma and the 9th Regiment stationed at Kanchanaburi in Thailand were both tasked to survey and lay out plans for the construction.13 In June 1942, the Japanese began dispatching Australian and British POWs from Singapore and Dutch POWs from Indonesia to Thailand and Burma. They were followed by some 200,000 conscripted Asian labourers from China, Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia.14 As the daily death toll and other casualties (sick and wounded) increased to high levels, more Asian labourers had to be brought in to both fronts throughout 1943 and 1944 as replacements and to repair the extensive damage to the railway caused by aerial assaults by Allied bombers. Undeterred but ill-prepared for the magnitude of the task of the railway construction, the Japanese went

13 K. Takayama, *Railwaymen in the War: Tales by Japanese Railway Soldiers in Burma and Thailand, 1941-47*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 8.

14 Saki Dockrill, “The Legacy of the ‘Pacific War’ as Seen from Europe”, in Saki Dockrill (ed.), *From Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima: The Second World War in Asia and the Pacific, 1941-45*, New York: Macmillan Press, 1994, p. 219.

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to the extent of “literally working their captives to death” to accomplish their mission15 as described by Hugh V. Clarke,

Having struck a deal with the Thai authorities in December 1941, the Japanese army was allowed to occupy Thailand for the purpose of railroad construction, provided Japan respected its sovereignty and did not meddle or infringe upon the internal affairs of the host nation.16 One of the reasons for the delay in starting the railway project at the Thai end was the opposition of local Thai landowners who refused to give up their property to make way for the construction. It was only after negotiations between Thai government representatives and the Japanese authorities that an agreement was reached. Thailand provided the land for the Japanese and agreed to undertake some of the work at the south end of the line. The Thais also helped with the railway roadbed construction from Kanchanaburi to Wan Yai some 120 km to the north-west of the starting point of the projected line. Thailand also shouldered part of the cost and supplied a portion of labour and materials. As a result, Japan considered the host nation as an ally and agreed not to suppress and subject Thailand’s citizens to forced labour unless the Thais wished to work on a voluntary basis or on contract with adequate compensation. Having established their presence in Thailand and Burma and their influence over the respective authorities, Japan’s plan to build the highly ambitious railway was within reach.

Notwithstanding the time frame forecasted and despite the treacherous topographical features, Japan was determined to proceed with the construction of the railroad regardless of the consequences. The Japanese Imperial Army quickly embarked

15 See Hugh V. Clarke, *A Life for Every Sleeper: A Pictorial Record of the Burma-Thailand Railway*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1996. POW Clark who survived the ordeal, gives a stinging account of deprivation and hostilities imposed by the aggressors on POWs and Asian labourers.

16 John B. Haseman, *The Thai Resistance Movement during World War II*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002, p. 11.

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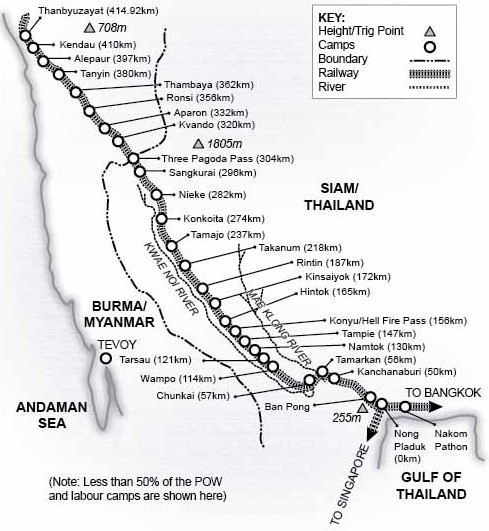
Beginnings of the Thai-Burma Railway

on the mammoth task by mobilising the POWs (Allied Forces) and all available civilian workers from Singapore, Malaya, Indonesia, Burma and Thailand to enable the completion of the 415 km railroad from Nong Pladok (Ban Pong District, Thailand) to Kanchanaburi and onwards to the northwest, to connect at Thanbyuzayat. From here the railway line towards the northern region close to eastern India was already in place. Hence, it was a matter of extreme urgency that the intermediate section from Burma to Thailand was linked to enable the forward thrust into India. A stretch of 304 km of the railway was to be constructed in Thailand (working westward from Nong Pladuk) while the remaining 111 km was in Burma (working south from Thanbyuzayat), to meet at the Thai-Burmese border named the Three Pagoda Pass. However, the construction from Thanbyuzayat was extended a further 41 km south from the border for both lines to finally meet at Konkoita in Thailand.17

17 Armando Ang, *The Brutal Holocaust: Japan’s World War II Atrocities and their Aftermath*, A1 Publishing, 2005, p. 185.

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**Figure 2.3: Death Railway track and location of major POW and labour camps**

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3

**Slave Labour**

“…following its aim to exploit South East Asia’s resources to the greatest degree, Japan’s armed forces tried to systematize one quite specific kind of labour by mobilising forced labour. Forced labour existed alongside other types of labour, such as contract work or normal wage labour, but was considered indispensable by Japan’s authorities owing to economic necessity and for strategic military reasons.”1

By February 1942, after the official surrender of Malaya, Japan had some 62,000 or more Allied Forces (British, Dutch, Australian and American) prisoners of war held in Changi Prison, Singapore.2 To kick-start the construction of the railway from both ends, the Japanese initially deployed in June 1942, almost daily, about 600 British POWs under the command of Major

R.S. Sykes RASC to Ban Pong.3 The first Australian prisoners of war sent to work on the railway numbered 3,000, known as the

1 Takuma Melber, “The Labour Recruitment of Local Inhabitants as Rōmusha in Japanese-Occupied South East Asia”, *International Review of Social History*, Volume 61, Issue 24, 2016, pp. 167-168.

2 Micheal Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Encyclopedia of Casualty and Other Figures*, 1492-2015, Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2015, p. 500.

3 Clifford Kinvig, “Allied POWs and the Burma-Thailand Railway”, in Philip Towle, Margaret Kosuge and Yoichu Kibata (eds.), *Japanese Prisoners of War*, London: Hambledon and London, 2000, p. 45.

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‘A’ Force, under Brigadier Varley. They left Changi in May 1942 to work on the airfields in southern Burma but in September 1942 were moved to Thanbyuzayat to commence work from the northern end of the railway line. In January 1943 the ‘Dunlop Force’ of about 900 Australian POWs under Colonel E.E. Dunlop arrived from Java to take up positions at the ‘Konyu’ camp along the River Kwai.4 Subsequently, at regular intervals and in batches of hundreds, the remaining POWs were moved in wagon and freight trains from Singapore to Thailand to various camps along the stretch of the proposed railway.

## The Indian Connection

In order to supplement the POW workforce for the construction of the railway, the Japanese made an effort to attract labourers from British territories, especially Malaya, by establishing close connections with prominent Indian expatriates and patriots in India and those among the Indian population in Malaya, who were believed to have come under the ideological influence of the Japanese. The formation of the Indian Independence League (IIL) reflected a cooperation agreement between expatriate Indian leaders and the Japanese administration. It consisted of the Council of Action chaired by Rash Behari Bose while K.P. Kesava Menon and Nedayam Raghavan (a Penang barrister) were among the civilian members of the council.5 One of the demands of the IIL was that the Indian National Army (INA) be recognised and treated as an allied army, and that all Indian POWs be released to the INA. Indian nationalist and freedom fighter Subhas Chandra Bose who arrived in Southeast Asia in February 1943, took over command of the INA base in Seletar.6 In July 1943, together with Rash Behari, Bose visited

4 Clifford Kinvig, “Allied POWs and the Burma-Thailand Railway”, p. 18.

5 S.N. Sen, *History of the Freedom Movement in India (1857-1947)* (Third Edition), New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited, 1997, p. 304.

6 Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: A Social and Economic History*, Honolulu, University of Hawai’I Press, 1997, p. 107.

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other training centres in Kuala Lumpur, Seremban and Ipoh. With around 12,000 Indian POWs (mainly Sikhs), the INA was 40,000-strong to impress upon the Japanese regime their resoluteness to fight alongside the Japanese to free India from British colonial rule.7

In order to convince the Indian populace and to overcome the language barrier, the Japanese needed IIL officials to propagate their campaign to ‘liberate’ India. Indian associations in Malaya had existed even before the war, such as the Central Indian Association and the Singapore Indian Independence League, among others. With Japanese encouragement, these groups amalgamated into local Indian Independence Leagues and became the main liaising organisations between the population and the Japanese occupiers, especially in the west coast states of Malaya. With the League pledging to improve the conditions of the jobless plantation labourers in Malaya, the Japanese were successful in encouraging all Indians to join the IIL. As a result of the influence of Bose among the Japanese authorities and domiciled Indians in Southeast Asia, the Indian independence movement in Southeast Asia was revamped.

In October 1941, Japan set up the Fujiwara Kikan, a military intelligence operation in Bangkok. Headed by Major Fujiwara Iwaichi (chief of intelligence of the 15th Army), Fujiwara’s staff comprised five commissioned officers and two Hindi speaking interpreters. Fujiwara’s first contact was with Pritam Singh Giani, who was a leader of the independence movement.8 Both Pritam Singh and Fujiwara urged Mohan Singh, the chief organiser of the INA, to form an Indian Army comprising captured Indian soldiers.9 Mohan Singh hesitated at first but eventually agreed to

7 See Green, L.C. ,“The Indian National Army Trials,” *The Modern Law Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1948, pp 47-69.

8 Joyce Lebra, *The Indian National Army and Japan*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1971, p. 7.

9 See Sugata Bose, *His Majesty’s Opponent*, Cambridge: The Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 241.

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the proposal that Fujiwara would hand over more than 40,000 Indian soldiers in his custody on condition that he would be treated as an ally of the Japanese and not as a prisoner of war.10 Subsequently, together with Fujiwara and Pritam Singh, Mohan Singh set out to contact Indians in the British Indian Army in Southeast Asia and also began recruiting those captured by the Japanese in Malaya. All Indian POWs and stragglers were placed under his charge. With the fall of Kuala Lumpur on 11 January 1942 (with 3,500 Indian POWs) and subsequently Singapore on 15 February 1942 (with 85,000 British troops, of whom 45,000 were Indians), Mohan Singh called for volunteers to join forces and fight the British for Indian independence.11 A large number of men came forward to join what came to be known as the Azad Hind Fauj (National Army of Independent India). It must be emphasised that Indian Independence League officials played an important role in convincing the Indian population to accept the offer to work on the railway project in Thailand as a patriotic contribution towards their nation. In the course of the railway construction, tens of thousands (men, women and children) risked their lives to fulfil IILA’s and INA’s agenda. It is quite possible that Bose, as head of the Indian government in exile, would have also signed an agreement permitting the IIL to recruit volunteers and forced labourers or could have probably inherited the agreement signed by his

predecessors – Rash Behari or Mohan Singh.

However, it is also known that Bose, concerned over news of torture and fatalities in the various camps, sent a delegation to investigate the conditions of Indian labourers on the railway construction. The delegation included an Indian, Amar Singh, from Bangkok and another Indian, Bramachari Kailasam, who was associated with Singapore and later became

10 Nilanjana Sengupta, *A Gentleman’s Word: The Legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012, p. 44.

11 See Tilak Raj Sareen, *Japan and the Indian National Army*, New Delhi: Mounto, 1996, pp. 72-75.

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famous as Swami Satyananda. Bramachari was originally with the Ramkrishna Mission and later became the founder of the Pure Life Society. After the war he was active in establishing several homes for the children orphaned as a result of the railway construction in Thailand. During his occassional visits to Taiping, Bramachari became well associated with Vachiravel who played a significant role to convince the Indian community and garner their financial support to establish an orphanage centre there.

The strength of Asian and POW manpower deployed and those who subsequently died in the construction of the Death Railway are shown in Table 3.1. These workers were primarily used to set up base by utilising all available railway and public buildings and to construct tents between Nong Pladuk and Nakhon Pathom stations (along the existing Singapore– Butterworth–Bangkok railway line). From Nong Pladuk (Ban Pong District) the new railway line was designed to bifurcate westward to the main depot in Kanchanaburi, a distance of 50km. Under the watchful eyes of the Japanese captors, the POWs, local contract labourers and those from Malaya and Indonesia commenced manual clearing of jungle and subsequent construction work on 23 June 1942. The contract labourers were not under Japanese control but under the Thai- Chinese contractors.

**Table 3.1: Manpower statistics of Allied POWs and Asian Workers on the Death Railway12**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Description Total forced labour** | **Total deaths** |
| Asian labourers 200,000 | +/- 80,000 |
| British POWs 30,000 | 6,540 |
| Dutch POWs 18,000 | 2,830 |
| Australian POWs 13,000 | 2,710 |
| American POWs 700 | +/- 356 |
| Source: Australian War Memorial, Thailand |  |

12 Table 3.1 does not indicate Asian labourers mobilised for the Kra Railway.

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Some reports suggest that 12,000 Japanese and 800 Koreans were employed as engineers, supervisors and guards to oversee the administration of the various camps during the construction of the rail track. Of this total figure, about 1,000 were reported to have died mainly due to various illnesses and also as a result of severe punishment meted by their own superior officers.13

Statistics in Table 3.2 indicate that 73,502 workers from Malaya were dispatched to work in Thailand. Of this figure, 24,490 workers (33.3 percent) died at the site, reflecting a mortality rate of 30 percent, while only 12,269 (16.3 percent) were reported to have returned. The workers who deserted (4,662 workers or 6.3 percent) were believed to have escaped while in transit or went into hiding in neighbouring Thai villages until the war was over and probably returned to Malaya much later. The fate of the remaining workers or (32,081 or 43.7 percent)) is unclear. Whether they eventually returned or not could not be verified.

**Table 3.2: Labourers transported from Malaya to work on the Thai–Burma and Kra Railways (8 October 1945)14**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **State** | **Total supplied** | **Deceased** | **Returned to Malaya** | **Deserted** | **Balance** |
| Malacca | 4,573 | 2,022 | 881 | 311 | 1,359 |
| N.  Sembilan | 10,871 | 3,593 | 1,608 | 439 | 5,231 |
| Selangor | 15,755 | 6,009 | 2,478 | 960 | 5,308 |
| Perak | 19,187 | 6,263 | 3,388 | 1,231 | 8,305 |

13 See Joan Beaumont, “Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum, Thai-Burma Railway”, in Martin Gregner and Bart Ziino (eds.), *The Heritage of War*, London: Routledge, 2012.

14 Cited in Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: A Social and Economic History*, 1997. See also South East Asia Translation and Interrogation Center (SEATIC), Publication 246, *Burma-Siam Railway*, 8 October 1945, WO203/6325, pp. 6 and 25.

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**Table 3.2: Labourers transported from Malaya to work on the Thai–Burma and Kra Railways (8 October 1945) (continued)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **State** | **Total supplied** | **Deceased** | **Returned to Malaya** | **Deserted** | **Balance** |
| Penang | 2,892 | 889 | 436 | 169 | 1,398 |
| Pahang | 2,278 | 576 | 381 | 124 | 1,197 |
| Kedah | 12,074 | 3,550 | 1,390 | 819 | 6,315 |
| Kelantan | 4,795 | 1,504 | 497 | 609 | 2,185 |
| Terengganu | 1,077 | 84 | 210 | - | 783 |
| Total | 73,502 | 24,490 | 12,269 | 4,662 | 32,081 |

Source: Translation Report No. 75, Oct. 1945. Sel. CA250/1945 (Malaya)

The figures in Table 3.2 could be the tip of the iceberg since a large number of labourers brought along their dependents (wife and children); such records were not available and had remained obscure. It is believed that in some cases, entire families perished, leaving no trace, while others lost loved ones. Moreover, some survivors claimed that many young men were taken away from the streets and elsewhere by Japanese soldiers without registration with the relevant authorities. As such, the total number of labourers taken away could be more than was reported (73,502) and it is likely that the total number of survivors/labourers who returned could have exceeded 17,000, which includes 4,662 who deserted and probably returned as well. Moreover, there is no clear account of the 32,081 labourers categorised under balance who could have escaped from captivity to return home.

The Japanese not only ordered district offices and labour departments in the states to act as recruiting agents, they also enlisted officials of the Indian Independence League, Oversea Chinese Association and the penghulus (village heads) to encourage labourers to register for work on the railway. These individuals and offices lured workers with the promise of attractive terms of service issued by the Japanese. The majority of the labourers are believed to be workers of Indian origin, from

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the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra, Orissa, and some from other states. They were brought in large numbers by the British government in the mid-19th century to work in plantations, roads and rail construction, ports and other sectors. A similar situation can be said for the presence of Indian labourers on the Burma line of the railway project.

Of the 100,000 workers recruited from Burma for the railroad project, many ran away and only 91,384 reached the base camp at Thanbyuzayat, as shown in Table 3.3. Japanese data collected at the end of the war indicated a total of 182,496 Asian labourers were employed on the railway construction. The Japanese had claimed that about half of these workers had deserted but Allied investigators believed that a substantial number counted as deserters had, in fact, died in the camps, at work sites or in the surrounding jungles. To the Japanese it was the working numbers in their custody that mattered, not those who were missing from action since replacements were easily made available.

It is believed that the initial involvement of a large number of local Thai contract workers had not been fully accounted for in the statistics shown in Table 3.3, probably because of the anti- Japanese sentiments that erupted into violence in Ban Pong and the unstable or dwindling Thai contract-labour situation along the Isthmus of Kra railway. It should be noted that Japanese statistics of workers from Malaya and Singapore may be arbitrary and might not include those who were unregistered.

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**Table 3.3: Japanese data on number of Asian Workers on the Railway**

**Origin Total employed Repatriated Deaths % Deaths Desertions Working at**

**surrender**

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|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Malaya & Singapore | 78,204 | 6,456 | 29,634 | 38 | 24,620 | 17,488 |
| Indonesians | 7,508 | - | 2,894 | 39 | 486 | 4,128 |
| Thai Chinese | 5,200 | 1,300 | 500 | 9.6 | 3,400 | - |
| Indo-Chinese | 200 | 120 | 25 | 1,2.5 | 25 | - |
| Burmese | 91,384 | 13,540 | 9,161 | 10 | 63,683 | 5,000 |
| Total | 18,2496 | 21,446 | 42,214 | 23 | 92,220 | 26,616 |

Source: TNA: PRO WO 325/56, Report on Coolies Camp Condition on the Burma-Siam Railway during the period November 1943–August 1945, p. 75

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**Table 3.4: POWs and Asian labourers on the Thai–Burma Railway**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Origin** | **Number Sent to the railway** | **Number of deaths** | **% of deaths** |
| POWs | 61,806 | 12,399 | 20 |
| Malaya/Singapore, Indonesia & Indo China | 91,112 | 32,996 | 36 |
| Burma | 178,836 | 40,000 | 22.4 |
| Total | 331,754 | 85,395 | 25.7 |

Source: C.C. Brett, ‘Burma-Siam Railway’, WO 203/6325 p. 25 (1946)

Statistics from the South East Asia Translation and Interrogation Centre (SEATIC) in Table 3.4 indicate that 269,948 Asian labourers worked on the railway line of whon 72,996 died

– a mortality rate of 27 percent. When the war ended, around 75,000 labourers (including 25,000 from Malaya, Singapore and Java and 40,000 from Burma) remained in the camps along the railway. It is quite likely that the number of unregistered workers (not included in Table 3.4) could have exceeded those registered.

However, it is likely that the statistics in Tables 3.1 to 3.4 did not take into account the labourers conscripted from Malaya to work on the Kra Isthmus Railway. Of the more than 100,000 labourers employed on this route, about 60,000 were from Malaya, some were from Indonesia and the rest were contract workers of Thai origin. In the case of workers from Burma, total deaths could possibly be 60,000 or 23.6 percent. Hence the overall deaths could possibly number 105,395 or 31.8 percent.

**Although estimates of Thai workers involved are relatively low and constitute only eight per cent of the total labour force, their presence on the Thai-Burma Railway should not be overlooked.** Thai labourers were deployed on the railway line from Nong Pladuk (the junction station connecting the main southern line), through Ban Pong to Kanchanaburi and the Isthmus of KRA railway project.

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Subsequently, reinforcements of labourers from Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia arrived and more than 16,000 POWs were dispatched to Kanchanaburi and from there they trekked through the jungle to Thanbyuzayat where construction from the opposite direction was to commence. Upon reaching Kancanaburi, the POWs had to plod along a narrow track to the various camps designated for them. Along the way, they had to repair the road or track to facilitate movement of supplies to camps. However, parts of this route by land were often impassable and beyond repair, especially during the monsoon rains between July and October.

## The Kra Railway

“…in a harrowing prelude to the excesses of the later Thai-Burma Railway, unencumbered by the niceties or any international agreements and not fearing post-war reprisals for their treatment of Asian civilians, the Japanese were quite prepared, if necessary, to work their Malayan labourers literally to their deaths.”15

Most of the workers for this operation were those initially recruited from the east coast states of Malaya for the Thai– Burma railway.16 Thousands were reported to have died or were maimed due to harsh treatment, chronic or terminal illness, starvation, adverse weather conditions and as a result of serious injuries.17 Due to inadequate facilities along the 92 km track, no proper medical treatment was ever administered. The dead were buried in shallow pits or in trenches along the line without any form of religious or ceremonial rites. Colleagues of Muslim workers who died had to scout around the neighbouring

15 “Notes on the Thai-Burma Railway: Part IX: The Kra Isthmus Railway,”

*Journal of Kyoto Seika University*, No. 27, p. 36.

16 Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: A Social and Economic History*, p. 183.

17 Anne E. Booth, *Colonial Legacies: Economic and Social Development in East and Southeast Asia*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007, p. 56.

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villages for white cloth to wrap the corpses as is customary before burial, but this was seldom observed, according to Jusoh Manap18 and his cousin Awang Hitam19, from Kelantan. Both men were engaged in moving and laying sleepers and rails on the track. During the occasional air raids, some labourers deserted their work sites and hid in neighbouring villages to escape from captivity, no longer able to bear the suffering and hardship. According to Jusoh and Awang, those caught in hiding were severely beaten and those who attempted to escape from custody were shot dead.

*Setiap hari berpuluh-puluh orang mati dan keadaan di kem-kem sungguh dahsyat, tanpa prehatin dari pihak Jepun dan semua kerja-kerja pembinaan dalam keadaan cuaca buruk dilaksanakan oleh buruh paksa dan pekerja tempatan (kontrak)*. (Every day there were tens of deaths in each camp and the situation in the camps was terrible with no empathy from the Japanese while all construction works in adverse weather conditions were carried out by the forced labour and local contract workers.) (Jusoh & Awang 2005)

On arrival in Chumphon, Jusoh and Awang’s batch of about 160 from their original base were split into smaller groups and distributed to various camps along the line. They had no contact with the others during the period of construction. Once the line was permanently destabilised in March 1945, those still alive had to trek on their own to Chumphon only to learn that very few of their comrades had survived. They could not discount the possibility that some, having married locals, could have stayed behind. Of those determined to return home, some needed urgent treatment in the only hospital in Chumphon while others sought humanitarian aid from the local community until the Japanese surrendered. As they were unaware of the repatriation procedures organised by the British authorities, they

18 Interview with Jusoh Manap, 2005. He was 83 years at the time.

19 Interview with Awang Hitam, 2005. He was aged 79 at the time.

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got on board private fishing vessels in Chumphon bound for Kota Bahru, Kelantan – their initial embarkation point.

Unlike the main Thai–Burma line which required digging and levelling of the rugged hills and into the face of steep cliffs to create a passage for the rail route and the laying of sleepers and rails, the backbreaking task for the labourers in the Kra railway was raising and compacting the track-bed on marshland, to a height of one metre or more in certain sections, by carting soil manually from neighbouring hills to mitigate flood waters during the long monsoon period. Rocks had to be broken with crude tools and carried with gravel (ballast material for consolidation) in sacks suspended from poles over the shoulders for the track. Rocks and gravel were carted in a similar manner or loaded onto trucks where possible for the construction of culverts under the track-bed and for bridges over rivers and streams. On both lines, after the metal rails had been precisely aligned, the labourers had to lean forward with sledge hammers to drive the metal spikes meant to hold the rails firmly to the sleepers, resulting in serious injuries to the eyes and limbs from flying sparks and the backlash of wobbly spikes.

Some of the survivors were unable to recall the specific location of labour camps they were assigned to or which of the two lines they were involved in. They were only familiar with the term Siam–Burma Railway, nicknamed ‘**Death Railway’ or *Keretapi Maut* in the Malay language.** *The term Kra Railway was alien to them. However, based on the type of work they did, the topographical features of the surrounding area, ground* conditions, type of bridges constructed and whether POWs had worked alongside them, it was possible to surmise which rail line they had worked on. In the case of Periasamy Subrayen20, from Puchong, Selangor, he had worked on the Kra Railway as he did not recall seeing Allied soldiers most likely at the construction sites, and remembered that their attap huts were on stilts with

20 Interview with Periasamy Subrayen, 2005. He was aged 80 at the time.

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raised wooden or bamboo flooring due to the high water table in the area. The individual huts could only accommodate 40 to 50 workers unlike the long huts along the main Thai–Burma line. He also recounted carrying the decomposed corpses of comrades lying amidst their own waste for burial in shallow pits and trenches along the rail track, and not in mass graves in the neighbourhood of camps, as was the case on the main Thai–Burma line. Despite his stuttering voice and severe hearing impairment which made it difficult to catch on to what he was saying, Periasamy said that after the Kra rail line was destabilised, the workers had to struggle over a long distance along the route without humanitarian aid from the Japanese, to reach a hospital for treatment. He also said the hospital was over-crowded with patients and most of the survivors had to occupy the concrete flooring for weeks and months before they were discharged for repatriation.

Thai resident Sabiang Chuchat, recalled as a boy of six years being afraid of the Japanese soldiers whom he had seen beating the Malayan workers. Sabiang told David Boggett in 200421 that among the Malayan workers, there were many Indians. He had seen the workers carrying earth from the neighbouring hills to prepare the ground for the railway terminal, the warehouse buildings and the port. They had to load heavy goods onto the boats. The death toll was high as there was insufficient food and the bodies of those who died from illness were thrown into holes without burial services or cremation. Sabiang had also seen many Thai people arrested by the Japanese allegedly for stealing. They were thrown in prison and some died. He had heard that those who tried to escape were shot.

Sir Andrew Gilchrist, who arrived in Chumphon after the war in 1945 as the Consul of the British, described in a letter to his wife the human devastation he encountered:

21 “Notes on the Thai-Burma Railway: Part IX: The Kra Isthmus Railway,”

*Journal of Kyoto Seika University*, No. 27, p. 36.

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Thousands of sick and starving and dying labourers brought up from Malaya, Singapore, Java and Sumatra to work on the roads and railways had now been abandoned to their own devices. From their working camps those creatures now came walking and crawling in search of food and help.

I visited some of the dispersal camps including a place which the Japanese called a hospital. It was nothing but a ghastly charnel house; a series of rotting huts in heavy jungle with some 30 serious cases and a few corpses huddled together on filthy wooden floors. The smell was intolerable; the commonest diseases were tropical diseases and dysentery apart from beri-beri, malaria, scabies, typhoid, pneumonia, syphilis, gonorrhoea and cancer. (Boggett 2004)

Gilchrist observed that the only medicine available was a kind of weak red disinfectant, and there were no bandages but paper dressings made of what looked like toilet paper. He described the food as consisting of rice and vegetable soup in meagre quantities. There were no sanitary facilities, and all the patients were in a filthy state and infested with vermin.

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**Deadly Race to the Finish**

“…section leaders and coy commanders regarded coolie camp conditions as a ‘minor detail’; they had more important matters to look after, the progress of the construction work.”1

As construction work on the Japanese railway projects inThailand and Burma picked up momentum, so did the recruitment of Asian workers. The sudden suspension or disruption of foreign-owned operations in Malaya left workers desperate, and the Japanese, urgently in need of a huge workforce to supplement the Allied Forces engaged in the railway construction, took advantage of the situation and embarked on a recruitment drive throughout Malaya and Singapore. A similar recruitment exercise was carried out to provide a large number of workers (Burmese nationals and those of Indian origin) for the construction of the southward stretch from Thanbyuzayat. After establishing their administrative headquarters in Kanchanaburi manned by thousands of Japanese personnel, a substantial number of Chinese from mainland China held in transit labour camps in Singapore and from the tin mines in Malaya were brought in for their well known skills as tailors, laundrymen, technicians, mechanics, artisans, carpenters, masons, welders and cooks.

1 Paul H. Kratoska, *The Thailand-Burma Railway, 1942-1946*, Volume IV: Asian labour, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 20.

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The Japanese initially adopted a passive approach, coaxing and enticing the people, promising jobs with incentives of a six-month contract, free rail travel, housing, food, medical facilities and a daily wage of one Straits Dollar. They sought the help of Indian Independence League officials to campaign on their behalf, knowing that such an approach would be more convincing to the Indian labourers. They also promised to pay a monthly allowance to the dependents left behind but this was hardly ever honoured. All these benefits appeared attractive and appealing at a time when jobs were frozen and the economy was at its lowest in Malaya and Singapore. Moreover, the offer was much more attractive than the general workers’ average daily wages of 15 to 30 cents under the British administration. Many workers (some with families) were thus willing to accept such a glossy offer with its benefits, and to undertake a long journey to a foreign land. The Japanese administration advised the local authorities (Labour Departments and District Offices) in the various states to register voluntary workers aged between 18 and 41 years but this was not strictly adhered to, as many in their early teens were also recruited and forced to work with the adults.

However, towards the end of 1942, faced with a lower than expected response from workers in Malaya, the Japanese resorted to press-gang tactics and forced labour. This form of conscription was deemed urgent to supplement the workforce of an estimated 61,700 Allied POWs (at both fronts), which was dwindling in numbers due to loss of lives and increased incidence of sickness as a result of adverse weather conditions and the ruthless treatment from the merciless Japanese engineers and soldiers. In this forcible recruitment campaign launched throughout Malaya and Singapore, armed Japanese soldiers on bicycles accompanied a convoy of army trucks and tanks that rumbled into estates, tin mines, railway depots, ports, towns and villages late at night, cordoned off the areas and demanded at least one able-bodied male member from each family for the

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Deadly Race to the Finish

railway work in Thailand. Those who wished to bring along their wife and children were allowed to do so and soon, some 72,000 or more workers (Indians, Chinese, Malays and other minority races from Malaya and Singapore) and Javanese (from Indonesia) were recruited and dispatched.

At short notice and with scant possessions (clothing, pillow and blanket) wrapped in straw mats or secured in gunny sacks, the workers were loaded onto trucks and taken to the nearest railway station for the journey to Kanchanaburi in Thailand. With coordination from their railway administration in Malaya, the Japanese ensured the swift transportation of workers in order to complete the railroad on time. During the long and perilous journey, the workers had to survive on just one meal per day and were exhausted by the time they reached Kanchanaburi. Some young workers were believed to have jumped off the train before it reached Kanchanaburi to escape captivity.

Even after the main Siam–Burma line was completed on 25 October 1943, incessant Allied bombing raids caused much damage to it and urgent repairs were needed, for which more labour reinforcements were sought. In February 1944, the Japanese ordered the Indian Independence League, the Oversea Chinese Association, the penghulus and village heads to recruit more workers. Earlier, when thousands of labourers were loaded onto freight trains bound north, thousands others were sent south to Singapore from where they were dispatched by cargo ships via the South China Sea to Saigon (Vietnam) where they were kept for two or three days before being taken on trucks to the Mekong River to continue their journey by boat to Phnom Penh in Cambodia. From there they travelled by wagon trains to Bangkok and beyond to Kanchanaburi before hiking several days to distant camps along the main route.

In Kanchanaburi, the Japanese selected workers with reasonable education and supervisory experience in various fields from Malaya and Singapore to accompany their guards and convey messages to the labourers, provide feedback on

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the general situation in the camps and for other functions. They had also recruited doctors and paramedics from Malaya and Singapore to work alongside their medical personnel. Those in constant contact with the Japanese personnel had the opportunity to learn the Japanese language to improve their communication skills. The coordinators were viewed as assets to the regime and were treated fairly and without intimidation, harassment and roughness. They were paid better wages than the labourers and were even given the option to be compensated with rice, flour and sugar in lieu of wages.

## Horrific, Harsh Conditions

Arumugam Kandasamy,2 from Linggi, Negeri Sembilan, was 15 years old when he and about 160 workers (some with families) from the Rantau district were hurriedly sent on army trucks to the Seremban railway station, carrying only a few items of clothing and basic kitchen utensils. More workers from other areas had arrived earlier and the station was crowded. All the males were then directed by the Japanese guards to the Labour office near the lake gardens for a briefing and enlistment exercise. Each worker was issued with a registration number. Arumugam said if memory served, the number given to him was 194. Once back at the station, they had to wait for hours for the south-bound train to Singapore. Since no food or refreshment was provided, they had to buy food at the neighbouring shops under the surveillance of Japanese guards. Mingling with the others, Arumugam sensed an eagerness for the new job opportunities with compensation and other benefits as promised by government officials. When the freight train arrived in the late afternoon, they were cramped into wagons and open trailers. On arrival at the Tanjung Pagar railway station in Singapore that night, they were given a meagre

2 Interview with Arumugam Kandasamy, 2013. He was 86 years old.

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meal. The following morning they were put on board a cargo ship for a three-day journey to Saigon, Vietnam.

When we arrived at Kanchanaburi, our group of roughly 1,000 workers (mostly barefoot) had to trudge over rugged terrain on narrow paths and elephant tracks, sometimes in knee-deep swamp, through the dense jungle in adverse weather for almost two weeks before reaching Nikkei camp, about 230km from Kanchanaburi and close to the Burmese border.” (Arumugam 2013).

Those who could not continue were left to perish in the jungles. Along the way, under orders from the Japanese and Korean guards, they stopped briefly at specific locations near camps to prepare their meals with the supplies they had brought. They were also ordered to clear cave-ins and landslides along the old road track using crude tools. When they reached their base, they found food supplies to last a couple of months had been pre-arranged. They were told by their captors to be prepared for work the following morning. Despite the fatigue of their stressful journey, the scorching heat and downpours, the workers had to obey. They were organised into groups of about 25 workers each, and placed under a leader who was responsible for ensuring full daily turnout, discipline and completion of daily assignments. Arumugam learnt that his elder brother, Kaliaperumal, who had gone much earlier to Kanchanaburi and was sent north to Wan Yai camp with other labourers, had tragically died of illness one month before he (Arumugam) arrived.

He recalled that the Japanese officers took a liking to him after some time as he was young, intelligent and energetic and could communicate fairly well in their language, They accepted him as their aide and confidante, a status he enjoyed until the Japanese surrender. “I was fortunate, I could share the accommodation and food provided for the guards. After the daily morning muster for labourers, I accompanied the Japanese officer on his inspection of all sections of the camp and the construction site of the railroad.” He said fear of

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losing his position of favour and being downgraded to labour status prevented him from showing empathy for his comrades tormented by the guards who flogged late workers, and made them work late into the night by the dim light of bamboo torches to repair the line whenever Allied bombers damaged it. He also said the guards themselves were flogged by Japanese officers for misconduct, defiance or delays in achieving operational targets. Conditions at the camp were harsh; medical treatment for serious injuries and critical illness was inadequate, and those dying were left in their pathetic state.

When the entire stretch of the railway was completed in October 1943, the Japanese regime moved troops and military supplies to Burma despite the occasional setback due to aerial assaults by Allied bombers along the rail track. Arumugam recalled seeing Indian men and women in army attire assembled in the vicinity of the ‘Nikkei’ station, which was the second last station north before ‘Sonkurai’ and a transit point on the Thai section of the railway, where there was a change of locomotive to continue the journey into Burmese territory. He later realised that the soldiers were from the Indian National Army (INA) trained in weaponry in Singapore and dispatched to the Burmese border to fight alongside the Japanese army and liberate India from British colonial rule.

Francis Tang Pooi Kong3, from Petaling Jaya, Selangor, recalled as a young boy journeying by freight train to Ban Pong with his late father Tang Fatt (aged 31 at the time), his mother, two younger siblings, his 20-year-old cousin Chan Soo, and grandmother. The local authorities assigned to act as recruiting agents for the Japanese granted his father’s request to bring along family of seven. According to Tang, many were lured by the promises of attractive wages, good food and living conditions and were taken away from tin mines in Tanjung Tualang and Kamunting, Perak. They were loaded onto trucks and taken to

3 Interview with Francis Tang Pooi Kong, 2013. He was 74 at the time.

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the railway station in Taiping where they boarded a goods train, cramped into wagons and open carriages along with hundreds of workers from Johor, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor. More workers boarded the train when it stopped briefly at Prai station. “The blazing heat and occasional downpours were unbearable, especially for the elderly dependents and young children.” After three tormenting days they arrived in Ban Pong, Thailand and were taken by truck westwards to the main depot in Kanchanaburi. “The long journey and inadequate meals and rough weather had dampened the spirit and enthusiasm of disgruntled workers who were unaware of what was to be expected on foreign soil.”

The skilled workers (mainly Chinese) were directed to the labour camps in the vicinity whilst the unskilled labourers were issued working tools and dispatched on foot to camps further north, recounted Tang. His father was assigned to work as a mechanic in the Japanese army workshop while his cousin worked as a welder. Tang was in the care of his grandmother and seldom saw his father or his cousin who had to work late into the night. Being very young, he spent his time playing with other children, unaware of the military campaign in the region. However, he remembered the air raids in nearby locations which caused tremors in the camp, and his grandmother rushing to bring him back to their attap hut. Tang recalled that the young children in the camp were often gathered and taught the Japanese language by a stern tutor. He remembered some of the Japanese phrases taught to them, such as *ohayo gozaimas* (good morning), *oyasumi nasai* (good night), *ogenki deska*? (how are you?) and *dokoni sunde imaska*? (where do you live?). He also recalled that daily meals were satisfactory but not the accommodation as the attap roof leaked copiously whenever it rained.

About a year after the Japanese surrender, Tang, who was seven years old, and his family along with other workers were taken in army trucks to Bangkok. After almost two weeks in a

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transit camp, they were repatriated by steamship on a three-day voyage to Singapore, where they were quarantined for about a month in a camp near the Changi prison before taking a train to Ipoh and thence to their hometown of Taiping. Soon after, his family offered thanksgiving prayers at a Chinese temple for their safe return.

Lee Kwang Ting4, from Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan, was a laundryman for the Japanese army officers, washing, drying, ironing and delivering their uniforms. He said he and the other laundrymen developed blisters on their palms and fingers as well as athlete’s foot from handling caustic detergents and soaps daily, but they had to wash, dry, iron and deliver the uniforms on time regardless. The volume of daily laundry was so huge that they often had to work late into the night. Lee recalled seeing other workers or their aged dependents in critical condition carried in stretchers to a nearby hospital where visiting the sick was prohibited. “Many of those admitted to the hospital never returned to the camp and were presumed dead and buried but the location of the burial ground has remained a mystery ever since.” He remembered the day in August 1945 when workers downed their tools, rushed to the open grounds and holding leaflets of liberation from Japanese captivity, cheered and hugged one another in joy and relief. Upon his return to Seremban in early 1946 by train from Bangkok, he learnt that some of his close friends from Nilai, Negeri Sembilan who were assigned to work on the main metal bridge and at other worksites north of Kanchanaburi, had failed to return. Their families, not knowing the fate of their loved ones, had tried to get information from the Labour Department and District Office in the locality where registration had been conducted, but their enquiries only drew vague responses.

4 Interview with Lee Kwang Ting, 2007. He was 79 at the time.

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Loke Wing Yew5, Subang Jaya, Selangor, was 17 when he was forcibly taken away to work on the Thai section of the railway. He was amongst a large group of workers who were put on a freight train which stopped at Ipoh and Prai stations to load more workers. On arrival at Nong Pladuk the workers were taken by army trucks to Kanchanaburi. From there Loke’s group comprising a few hundred workers mainly from the estates, was dispatched on foot to the labour camp some distance north of Chunkai. One month later, when thousands of additional labourers arrived from Malaya, his group was ordered to move to the Burmese camp at ‘Kiyando 1’6 close to the Thai-Burma border. They travelled some of the distance in wagons and open carriages and the rest on foot. Due to the unhygienic conditions, shortage of food, inadequate medical care and intense pressure at work sites, many of Loke’s co-workers fell ill, and deaths of men, women and children occurred daily. “The stench from the burial sites and mass graves was unbearable,” he said, “but hunger and the need to survive left the workers with no choice but to bear the deplorable conditions even while consuming their meals.”

Loke too was taken seriously ill with diarrhoea and bedridden for several days, severely dehydrated and extremely weak and tired, he thought death was near and he would never again see his beloved parents back home. “I often shed tears over my predicament and prayed for divine intervention to save my life.” The Chinese cook who took pity on him advised him to consume daily rice water mixed with salt. After a few days the simple remedy worked and he was back on his feet. As the situation in the camps was worsening by the day, Loke voiced his concern to the Japanese officers, but nothing came out of it. One morning soon after, he was pulled aside by a Japanese guard, taken to the store room and severely beaten on suspicion

5 Interview with Loke Wing Yew, 2007. He was 82 years old at the time.

6 Some of the names of the camps may have changed over time.

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of instigating the labourers to cease work unless living and working conditions, food and medical care improved. He was punched in the face and his spectacles were damaged. He said it was unbearable to watch the sadistic acts meted out to the labourers, especially those with unhealed wounds who were forced to work. At the work site where he was assigned to align and connect the rails with bolts and to hammer the spikes, he noticed workers with blood oozing from bandaged wounds.

When Loke’s group moved to the camps in ‘Kiyando 2’ and ‘Aparun’, it was no different; the Japanese guards continued to torture and inflict injuries on the labourers. He recalled that when his group of labourers was travelling in open carriages from ‘Kiyando 2’ to ‘Aparun’, an Allied fighter plane on noticing the large number of workers flew past very low. When the train reached ‘Aparun’ station the workers were ordered to get off and take cover. The fighter plane returned to strike at the locomotive, causing minor damage.

The situation in the camp in Aparun was unimaginable; when it rained, the attap roofing leaked badly and the occupants were soaked to the skin. The ground was often waterlogged. After these sections of the line were completed the group (consisting of some 500 labourers) moved to ‘Ronshi’ where the POWs, labourers from Malaya and those from Burma lived in separate camps in close proximity. Loke saw many Indians in the Burmese camp, some of whom could only communicate in Tamil. They looked shabby, weak and tired, wearing only loincloth, and some were on bamboo crutches. “The Japanese officers were extremely strict and harsh towards the labourers,” said Loke.

Unless critically ill, attendance at work was compulsory. The workers were required to be present with their tools at the muster ground by 6.00am everyday. They did not get even a single day of rest. The guards slapped or beat workers who were late. Whenever the turnout was low the guards would hunt for the absentees and flush them out from their tents and huts with batons for malingering. There was no respite for the beleaguered labourers. (Loke 2007)

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In another incident, Japanese soldiers raided the POW camp and removed all cooking utensils as penalty to starve the prisoners since they had stopped work abruptly due to shortage of food. The Japanese had expected the Allied prisoners to apologise and return to work but the prisoners were adamant. Suspicious of how they had managed to survive for almost a week, the Japanese spied on the prisoners’ movements and discovered that the Asian camps, out of sympathy, had been providing the POWs with hot water and some food daily. When the prisoners realised they were cornered, they gave in, apologised and resumed work. The meagre food rations remained unchanged.

Whenever there were aerial assaults on the rail tracks by the Allied B-29 bombers, the labourers and POWs were moved back and forth to repair the damage caused by the bombing, working through the night to facilitate the movement of trains. Apart from the maintenance of the rail track, the mud road leading to the camps had to be upgraded from time to time to enable the movement of supplies by Japanese trucks from Thanbyuzyat.

## Cruelty of Korean Guards

In the regime’s pecking order, the Japanese held senior positions while the lower ranks such as supervisors and guards were mainly Koreans who were fluent in the Japanese language. The Korean soldiers in charge of the POWs and labourers at the work sites treated the workers harshly and inflicted serious injuries on them. The subservient workforce often took the Koreans for Japanese as they had similar physical features.

For more than three years, the captives had to bear the pain and torture, and watched as their fellow workers collapsed and died in harness. Others succumbed to the appalling mental and physical conditions. With each passing day and the rising death toll, the workers realised their hopes and prayers for respite were futile. Each air raid by Allied bombers renewed the workers’ hopes for liberation but these were often dashed.

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Over time, the limited clothing that the labourers wore became tattered and hung on them like rags. The workers had to resort to using rice sacks as rough coverings. Some draped the sacks over their blistered backs while others fashioned loincloth out of them. Even the bare-bodied POWs had to use their tattered rags as loincloth. To protect their soles and heels from injuries, the POWs tied strips of tree bark around their feet. During the wet season many labourers who worked barefoot developed gangrene and elephantiasis due to untreated open wounds. Most of them did not survive.

After repair works were completed on the railroad following the surrender of the Japanese, the labourers originally from Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia were moved south to Nikkei camp in the Thai section before they were put on trains to Tamarkan camp where the sick were treated at the nearby hospital. Loke assisted the Indian and British doctors to nurse the sick labourers and also acted as interpreter.

Muthu Karuppannathavar7, from Bandar Seri Jempol, Negeri Sembilan, had worked in two camps along the Burma section of the railway but could not recall which camps. He said that over time, the clothing they brought along wore out and they had to work bare-bodied with strips of rags or gunny sack around their waists as they carried metal rails and sleepers over long distances through the rough terrain. Deaths in the camp provided the opportunity to salvage whatever clothing was left behind. In some cases, the women offered strips of sarees for use as loincloth. Once the Japanese surrendered, the Allied Forces provided the labourers with clothes.

Retired deputy superintendent of police V. Alagasu8, from Ipoh, Perak, was 19 when he was taken away from his hometown of Raub, Pahang in 1943 to work on the death railway. Along with hundreds others from nearby areas of

7 Interview with Muthu Karuppannathavar, 2005. He was 81 at the time.

8 Interview with V. Alagasu, 2006. He was aged 82 at the time.

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Mentakab and Jerantut, he was brought by army truck to the railway station and made to squat on the platform for hours until the freight train arrived. Some of the Indian workers from the estates had their families with them – wives and children carrying small bundles of clothing in gunny sacks or wrapped in plastic sheets and straw mats. The Japanese guards took a head count of male workers before “herding them into open trailers, covered wagons and carriages meant for transporting cattle and horses,” according to Alagasu.

When they arrived at Gemas railway station at dusk, they were given their first meal of the day and confined to the compound of the railway station. “We rested for the night on the platform under the watchful eyes of the guards armed with rifles and batons.” Just before dawn they were ordered to get into a single file to receive their breakfast of light porridge topped with roasted fish fries and some vegetables before they boarded the goods train bound for Nong Pladok in Thailand. After an overnight stay in tents and old buildings, a small number of workers with families were transported by truck to Kanchanaburi. The rest, numbering a few hundred, rode on open trailers laden with railway sleepers or gravel to a certain point before trekking a few kilometres to the main labour camp in Kanchanaburi. The journey from Raub to the main camp in Kanchanaburi took almost five days, according to Alagasu’s account.

At Kanchanaburi, the group was split into smaller numbers and hurriedly dispatched in trailers towed by diesel locomotives to nearby labour camps along the Thai section of the railway. Some of them were assigned to work on the southbound stretch from Thanbyuzayat and travelled first by rail and then on foot over the treacherous terrain through dense jungle to the main labour camp. Together with workers from Burma and the POWs stationed there, they were made to work day and night in adverse weather conditions to complete the station building and other facilities at the final point on the railway.

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Then, they had to connect the rails to the existing line towards northern Burma. The station was located about 1.5km from Thambyuzayat town, eclipsed by the dense jungle canopy to avoid detection by Allied bomber planes that occasionally hovered over the area. “We lived in fear and rushed for cover whenever we sighted a plane flying at low altitude.” Being quite fluent in English and Japanese, Alagasu was later assigned to help in the operation of the station which was carried out only at night.

At the work sites, the Japanese guards were merciless in their treatment of the Asian workers and POWs. “We had to put up with deplorable conditions in the labour camps, the heavy casualties amongst workers and the daily dumping of dead bodies in mass graves that emitted an unbearable stench. The Japanese guards by their vicious acts had blood on their hands. The labourers were forced into surrendering their lives and were buried in anonymity”. (Alagasu 2006)

An account of Alagasu’s experience was later compiled by the late D.M. Ponnusamy, a member of the Taiping Historical Society, titled ‘Saga of the Death Railway Survivors’. The following are excerpts from Alagasu’s story as told to Ponnusamy.

Once I landed at the camp site, all sorts of work awaited me. The railway construction was going full swing and I was ordered to perform all duties assigned to me. I did not even know I was at the end of the railway line in Burmese territory at a place known as ‘Shin’ Thanbyuzayat. I gained a lot of experience working for the Japanese. Perhaps it was also the motivation from co-workers that kept me going. To be able to survive the construction was not easy as thousands died.

The Japanese soldiers were ruthless to the first degree. It is understood the Commander of the Imperial Army took orders from the Emperor and the orders had to be fulfilled at any cost. The Death Railway is a monument in the annals of the Second World War and will be remembered throughout Asia, England, Australia, Denmark and the United States.

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I was half my original weight when I returned and my relatives could hardly recognise me. They helped me with good food during my recuperation. Later, I joined the police force and rose to the rank of Deputy Superintendent. But it has been extremely difficult to overcome the memories of the events while in captivity.

## Life-threatening Tasks

To facilitate the movement of logistics to the camps further north on the railway line, a steel bridge spanning a few hundred metres over the Mae Khlaung River near Kanchanaburi was constructed, mainly by the Allied Forces together with skilled Chinese workers. The Japanese exerted immense pressure on the POWs to complete the metal bridge by May 1943. While the metal bridge was being constructed, a wooden bridge of similar height and length was built in haste about 100 metres downstream for the movement of light diesel trucks with supplies. The construction of the second bridge was under the supervision of senior Allied officers. It was considered easier to repair the wooden bridge in case of aerial assaults. The Allied Forces regularly bombed both bridges between December 1944 and June 1945. Several sections of the metal bridge were badly damaged and as envisaged, the wooden bridge often served as a substitute.9

The Asian workers, working 10 to 12 hours daily without break, were mainly tasked to clear the undergrowth, fell and drag huge trees, uproot the stumps, level the track, lay the sleepers and position the rails. Asian workers who collapsed from the strain and fatigue were believed to have been buried alive under the rubble, and their bodies never retrieved, according to John Arokiasamy10, from Alor Gajah, Malacca. John was 16 when he was taken away from his home in Kemuning estate to work

9 Hugh V. Clarke, *A Life for Every Sleeper: A Pictorial Record of the Burma- Thailand Railway,* NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1986.

10 Interview with John Arokiasamy, 2005. He was 86 years old at the time.

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on the railway. He said those who were seriously injured by falling rocks were left unattended at the tracks until the day’s work was over, and only then were their comrades allowed to carry them on makeshift stretchers to the camp for treatment.

Dwindling in numbers due to illness and deaths, the Asian workers were directed to the various camps along the intended rail route and at locations closer to the River Kwai Noi. Under the watchful eyes of the Japanese and Korean guards and escorts, the workers (mostly barefooted) had to carry on their backs their belongings and primitive working tools through the thick jungle to the distant camps. Those with young children had to cope with the additional burden of ensuring their safety and health. Subsequently, as each section of the railroad was cleared, levelled and compacted, and the sleepers and rails were laid, the workers were ordered to abandon camp and move to a new site which could be as far as 20km to 30km away. Later, as the laying of tracks progressed, the Asian workers and the Allied POWs could travel in wagons and open trailers towed by mini diesel locomotives over short distances.

The Allied POWs moved camps in similar fashion, directed to sections of the track where their expertise was required in the construction of massive wooden bridges over gullies, lowland swamps and along steep edges of cliffs, especially trestle bridges – six them, each spanning a distance of 200 metres to 600 metres – and the main metal and wooden bridges over River Kwai Khlaung in Kanchanaburi. About 660 bridges were constructed, using 30,000 timbers as girders on both sections of the major rail line and spanned about 15km in total length.11 The huge volume of timber (for bridges and sleepers) was harvested from the adjacent jungles and hauled to the various sites by a herd of elephants guided by their mahouts from Thailand and Burma. Life-threatening tasks undertaken during construction of the trestle bridges which required several decks or tiers and

11 Hugh V. Clark, *A Life for Every Sleeper*, p. 11.

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enormous volumes of timber resulted in heavy casualties among the Allied Forces and some Asian workers. Some lost their limbs while others were crushed under the weight of falling timber or fell on rocks and into deep swamps. Groups of Asian workers were tasked to drive the main timber supports into the ground (piling) using huge chunks of solid timber blocks with the aid of pulleys.

Amongst these workers was Ponniah Mariappan12, from Puchong, Selangor, who recalled sustaining injuries to his ribs and ankle after falling off the bridge but was forced to work despite suffering severe chest pains. Some of the trestle bridges or ‘deck of cards’ (as the POWs called them) were built to a height of 20 to 30 metres or more above the base of terraces in cliffs. Such massive structures along the extremely hazardous sections between Kanchanaburi and Nam Tok have since been reinforced with concrete supports and remain symbolic masterpieces of exemplary craftsmanship delivered by the Allied Forces. Those beyond Nam Tok are no longer accessible as the rail line was dismantled after the war.

The POWs were also assigned to cut wedges through the rocky hills in order to create a passage for the rail track. Such features are the infamous ‘Wampo’ viaduct and ‘Chungkai’ and ‘Konyu’ or ‘Hellfire Pass’ cuttings 75 metres long and 25 metres deep which were dug and carved out manually using crude tools like pickaxe, crowbar, sledge hammer, chisel, hoe and spade. The debris was excavated on bamboo and gunnysack ‘stretchers’, while chunks of broken rocks were disposed of manually.

The POWs working at these sites were often tortured by the Japanese guards and made to work 18 to 20 hours a day. Wielding bamboo or wooden batons fitted with manila rope as whips, the hawk-eyed guards flogged the POWs for being slow or weak. One brutal form of punishment meted out for any form

12 Interview with Ponniah Mariappan, 2005. He was 86 at the time.

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of resistance, insubordination or dereliction of duty was to make the POWs balance a chunk of rock over the head for hours until they collapsed from exhaustion and lost consciousness. The laborious and stressful task of chipping solid rocks for packing with explosives coupled with the excavation of tons of debris that rained down caused deaths and serious body injuries to the POWs and some Asian workers. Even during the monsoon season and in torrential rain, the POWs and Asian workers were mercilessly driven by their captors.

While the Burma railroad in the north was subjected to increasing Allied bombing strikes, the metal and wooden bridges over the Mae Khlaung and Kwai Noi rivers near Kanchanaburi were also hit more than once to disrupt the rail service and cripple the planned advancement of the Japanese forces. Heavy aerial assaults which occasionally strayed from their intended target zones to nearby sites resulted in heavy casualties among the POWs and Asian workers. Major repairs to damaged bridges and rail tracks were swiftly carried out as the Japanese regime had a substantial workforce at its disposal. On certain occasions, at the first sight of aircraft overhead, the locomotives towing trailers loaded with workers were swiftly moved into hiding under the jungle canopy.

However, it was not always possible to take cover in time, resulting in severe injuries and deaths from the air raids, according to Kumarasamy Vythilingam13, from Rawang, Selangor. Kumarasamy worked as a fireman on the steam locomotive when he was captured by Japanese guards at the railway depot on Tapah Road, Perak in May 1942. He was just

16. He recounted the severe impact of air strikes on the track, leaving yawning holes, twisted rails and shattered sleepers. Immediately after the bombings, workers were summoned to repair the damage and made to work long into the night to complete repairs.

13 Interview with Kumarasamy Vythilingam, 2005. He was 80 years old at the time.

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When his group of about 1,000, comprising men, women and children, arrived in Kanchanaburi, they were issued with working tools, huge woks, rice, salted fish and drinking water. Under the control of armed guards, they were made to march along a narrow mud road for some distance and subsequently through the steep and rugged jungle terrain for more than seven days, stopping at midday for their only meal for the day (rice and salted fish) which they had to cook in the jungle. Most of them were already weak and tired by the time they reached the camp near Tamajo, close to the Burmese border, but the men were ordered to start work. Lifting his shirt to reveal a broad scar on his back, Kumarasamy related the time he slipped and fell at the work site, hurting his back.

I was lying for hours, on the steep, slippery slope below the track bed with my injured back against a tree stump, groaning in pain. Only when the day’s work was over were my co- workers allowed to carry me on a makeshift stretcher to the medical hut in the camp. After a long wait and in severe pain, a Japanese medical worker dressed the wound and left. There was no follow-up treatment and my condition worsened when the wound turned septic and maggot-infested. Fortunately, a British POW doctor on seeing my condition, took pity on me, removed the maggots and cleaned the wound. He checked and treated my wound daily until I was able to sit. Before I could recover fully, the Japanese guard forced me to resume work. If not for the British doctor, I could have ended up in one of the mass graves near the camp. (Kumarasamy 2005)

Kumarasamy also recounted a fatal accident due to human error he had witnessed at the work site. A Japanese guard who was in charge of the detonator had hastily triggered the dynamite to explode in the cavity of a huge granite boulder without first clearing the area of workers and POWs. The explosion caused huge chunks of rock to drop, pinning some of the workers to the ground. Others sustained serious injuries from flying rock fragments. The bodies under the rubble were never recovered and the stench in the area became increasingly unbearable.

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When the situation in the camp and at the work site became too volatile and risky, Kumarasamy and three other labourers planned their escape. They met a Thai villager who helped them escape for a fee. They were taken in a boat on the River Kwai-Noi by night to a village first, and then to another place where they had to wait four days to board the train to the Malayan border. While waiting for the train, they enjoyed good food and bought some new clothes. Once they reached the border, they sought the help of Malayan railway workers who helped them return to their respective locations.

Just a few weeks after our return, I came to know that the Japanese had surrendered. I find it hard to forget how cruelly we were treated. If the river and the trees along the stretch of the railway could speak, they would tell of the atrocities committed by the Japanese soldiers. (Kumarasamy 2005)

Kumarasamy’s niece, Ganggamah alias Packiam Mariappan, was just 12 years old when she accompanied her parents to Thailand. A few months later, her father died of cholera. She and her mother worked in the kitchen, helping the cooks. They lived with relatives until the war was over. She recalled that her mother would clean Kumarasamy’s wound and feed him when he was bedridden after the accident. When Kumarasamy suddenly went missing after the incident, her mother was constantly harassed by the guards over his whereabouts. Her mother thought Kumarasamy could no longer bear the work pressure and had taken his life in the jungle. “We didn’t know he was alive until after our return to Malaya when he appeared and told us how he escaped.” Two years after his return, Kumarasamy married Ganggamah.

John Philip De Mello14, from Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, related how, as the signalling guard on the rear wagon, he lay face down in the wagon, terrified when Allied bombs fell

14 Interview with John Philip De Mello, 2007. He was 84 at the time.

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not too far from the rail track. He recalled the times workers panicked and scrambled for cover as debris from the impact rained on them. ”The bombs left gaping holes on the track-bed, and uprooted vast areas of trees, their huge tree trunks with scorched branches and foliage strewn across the track line.” The railway was a meter gauge line, which was the standard of the Thai-Burma railway systems and had a single track through its entire length. There were no stations along the route but loops and sidings were constructed at intervals of three to four miles for loading and unloading cargo not far from the camps. Spurs extending to the jungle at roughly 10-mile intervals were also constructed as emergency exits for the train ahead of aerial assaults by Allied bombers.” Once the bombers were out of sight, the train had to wait till dawn for repair work on the track to be completed, with the Japanese guards yelling ‘Speedo, speedo’ to the workers to move faster.”

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**Camps from Hell**

“A lot of Tamil, Chinese and Malay labourers from Malaya have been brought up forcibly to work on the railway. There is a big camp a few kilometres below here, and another 2 or 3 kilometres up. We hear of the frightful casualties from cholera and other diseases among these people and of the brutality with which they are treated by the Japanese… There is no medical attention in these camps, and the wretched natives are of course unable to organise any communal sanitation.”1

In early 1942, ahead of the railroad construction, indigenous Thais from villages along the Kwai Khlaung and Kwai Noi rivers close to the railway track were hastily hired to clear vast tracts of land at numerous locations and construct housing camps for POWs using only bamboo and palm fronds (attap). With the arrival of the POWs, they were also tasked to clear swathes of jungle of four to six acres for each labour camp using thin canvas sheets as roofing for tents without side flaps, while the guard house, kitchen and clinic had attap roofs and side walling with openings for ventilation. For the POWs, attap huts about 200 feet long were constructed over the mud floor made out of bamboo poles and thatched roofing, with five feet high walls of weaved attap.. The huts were to accommodate between 150

1 Robert Hardie, *The Burma-Siam Railway: The Secret Diary of Dr. Robert Hardie*, *1942-1945*, London: Imperial War Museum, 1993.

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and 200 POWs each. Two raised platforms (one narrow to step on and the other six to seven feet wide, above, for resting) using split bamboo were constructed on either side of a narrow aisle for the labourers as well as the POWs. These structures were held in place with split rattan, vines and stripped bark from the jungle. The tents were to house between 30 and 50 workers each with less than a metre width for resting and sleeping. Burmese workers along the 111km stretch built similar structures.

The number of camps over the entire stretch is estimated to be between 60 and 70 or more, at intervals of five to six kilometres. There was hardly any privacy for workers who brought their families. It is believed that each camp for the Asian workers could accommodate between 1,500 and 2,500 workers. Camps for the Allied Forces were fewer in number but on a much larger scale at strategic locations where their engineering skills and ingenuity were needed. As operations moved forward, workers and POWs had to abandon the camps and move to new sites. This operation in phases explained the large number of camps, as not all were occupied at any one time, and the abandoned camps were often reoccupied whenever repair works were required on sections damaged by Allied aerial assaults. The POW camps, under very heavy security, were out of bounds for the Asian workers.

The timing and speed of construction of the various camps by the Thai villagers and POWs was something of a feat as some materials had to be transported by boats and carried to the sites. Over time, however, the weather-beaten bamboo poles and attap became infested with borers, beetles, bugs and other insects, which made living conditions unbearable. Relying only on small oil lamps at night, the workers had to grope in darkness in the event of an emergency. Surrounded by dense tropical jungle, night-time at the camps often brought haunting eerie sounds which the workers imagined were from the spirits of their dead fellow workers.

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Due to the wet and soggy ground conditions along the Kra Railway line, long huts on stilts with attap roofs and walls and raised bamboo flooring were built by Thai contractors to house about 50 workers each. The kitchen and guard posts were of similar structure but there were no proper clinics to treat critical illness (malaria, typhoid, cholera and dysentery) or serious work-related injuries. Some survivors remembered there was a cave in the nearby hills that was used as a clinic to treat emergency cases. Inadequate medical facilities and care caused the death of thousands of labourers, according to Dullah Ismail2 and Awang Mat Deraman3, from Machang and Tumpat, Kelantan respectively.

*Kami dianggap seperti binatang sehingga rawatan segera terhadap para pesakit atau yang tercedera tidak dilayani dalam masa singkat dan dipaksa untuk terus bekerja tanpa ada perasaan simpati oleh pihak tentera Jepun*. “We were regarded as animals; those who were sick or injured were not treated in time but forced to work without any sympathy from the Japanese army).” (Dullah Ismail 2005)

**Dead Men Walking**

Dullah and Awang were unable to pinpoint the location of the only hospital except to say it was most likely in Chumphon, and it was not equipped to cope with the daily inflow of patients. Those workers who were on the verge of death in camps were ignored until confirmed dead. The Japanese saw no urgency in burying the dead until the stench became intolerable. Some of the survivors interpreted the spiteful and despicable behaviour on the part of the captors as prejudice and hatred of other Asians. The ailing labourers on their deathbeds were viewed as dispensable liabilities, thus no effort was made to treat them.

2 Interview with Dullah Ismail, 2005. He was 76 years old at the time.

3 Interview with Awang Mat Deraman, 2007. He was 79 years old at the time.

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Along the major Thai-Burma line, the camps for POWs and labourers were located not too far from the River Kwai Noi. There were no proper latrines for the labourers and their families. The POWs dug pits, and once filled, were covered with soil and sprinkled with quicklime. In the case of the labourers, sanitation was not a priority. Those who were sick and weak discharged urine and faeces in the vicinity of the camps while the healthier ones eased themselves in the nearby bushes. The stench coupled with the waste attracted flies and other insects that found their way into the kitchen and other structures which rendered the camps unhygienic. The situation in the labourers’ camps was further compounded by the numerous mass graves within the vicinity which often flooded during the torrential rains. The receding flood waters polluted the river which was the main source of water for bathing, washing and drinking.

It was a similar situation in the labour camps along the Kra rail line. Due to the high water table along sections of the line, the corpses buried in shallow pits and trenches were exposed by occasional deluging, emitting a foul, intolerable odour. Water fetched from wells dug near camps for domestic use was untreated and contaminated due to the appalling sanitary conditions. According to some survivors there could have been between 30 and 40 separate camps for Muslims, non-Muslims and local contract workers, each housing 2,000 to 2,500 labourers.

On both railway projects, the wives of Indian labourers and their teenage and juvenile daughters were used as helpers in the kitchen while their sons were given various tasks in the officers’ mess and quarters, such as cleaning and polishing boots, tidying the quarters’ interior and exterior, washing kitchen utensils, attending to laundry, running errands and ventilating the office space by oscillating a broad sheet of canvas material hanging from the overhead beam. As compensation these youngsters were either given tips or leftover food from the kitchen.

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Manickam Munusamy,4 from Lanchang, Pahang, was among hundreds of estates labourers lured by officials of the Indian Independence League into working on the railway. He and other workers from the estates in the area were taken in Japanese trucks to the Labour Department in Raub, Panang, For registration and then put on a goods train bound for Gemas in the south. After waiting for more than 12 hours in Gemas, they boarded a freight train carrying labourers from Singapore and Johor to Nong Pladuk in Thailand, a journey which took five day. As construction work of the railway line to Kanchanaburi was in progress, the group of about 500 had to trek along the intended route with women folk and children under tight security. After trekking a few kilometres, they noticed a large number of Allied soldiers under the watch of Japanese guards, hurriedly laying sleepers and aligning metal rails on the track. Further down the trek they saw hundreds of Thai workers leisurely preparing the track bed. After a quick midday meal at the Thai camp, they continued trekking until they reached another site where labourers from Malaya (mainly Indians and some Malays and Chinese) were felling trees and clearing the undergrowth for the railway line. Manickam’s group spent the night on the soggy forest floor under plastic tents. The following morning, after a light meal, they made their way through the jungle to reach a very large transit camp in Kanchanburi. The next morning the Japanese guards told the group to assemble at

6.00 to receive instructions from an Indian translator on work ethics and discipline required in camps and to receive working tools before moving to a labour camp in Tamarkan. At the work site, they were ordered to fell and clear the trees and vegetation using crude tools such as machetes, axes, crowbars, spades and pickaxes, and to prepare the track bed. “It appeared that we were amongst the early pioneers dispatched from Malaya to commence work on the rail track.”

4 Interview with Manickam Munusamy, 2005. He was 84 years old at the time.

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Manikam recalled that more Indian labourers, some with families, continued to arrive on a regular basis and were directed along a narrow track through the jungle to other destinations further north. After a few months, he was taken away by a Japanese officer whom he only remembered as Fukida, to a newly constructed camp in ‘Hintok’. While waiting for new arrivals, he was assigned to spruce up the officers’ quarters, the common mess for soldiers and the surroundings. Having gained their confidence and trust, he was provided the comfort of living space with the guards. His routine tasks were to maintain the quarters and the compound, lay the officers’ food on the table, wash dishes, clean and polish boots, and run errands.

Soon after, a large group of Indians arrived. Numbering close to 1,000, the group comprised men, women, teenage girls and children. Within a few days the camp had reached full capacity with the arrival of some 2,000 labourers. On both occasions, Manikam accompanied the Japanese guards and directed the labourers to their huts but was not allowed further communication with them. During his three years with the Japanese officers and guards, Manickam had gained a reasonable command of their language. He recounted the squalid conditions at the camp – starvation rations, poor sanitation, serious injuries, poor medical treatment and brutal treatment, leading to daily deaths of workers and dependents. To add to the misery and hardship, Manikam witnessed incidents which made him worry about his young female relatives left behind in the previous camp in Tamarkan, fearful of what might have befallen them.

As the railway line neared completion, the jubilant Japanese began celebrating by organising late night parties. I observed from a distance the drunken Japanese soldiers abusing young Indian women and teenage girls who were hauled into the soldiers’ mess for private orgies that went on past midnight. One young woman became hysterical after the sexual abuse and, unable to tell her husband about her ordeal, absconded from the camp under pitch darkness. Her husband searched

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in vain for her. A few days later he went berserk and hanged himself from a tree near the edge of the jungle . Another young Indian girl suffered psychological trauma from the repeated sexual harassment. (Manikam 2005)

When the railway was completed in October 1943, Manickam accompanied the Japanese team that installed overhead communication cables along the rail track between ‘Hintok’ and ‘Konyu’, where a major POW camp was located. Whenever the officers encountered disruptions in communication, he was summoned to accompany the guards to inspect the cables and restore the system. Just before the official surrender of the Japanese, he saw the guards hastily removing numerous bundles of documents from the officer’s cabinets. The documents were then taken to the jungle fringe near the river and burnt.

After the change in command, Manikam was retained by the Allied officers and assigned to inspect labour quarters, and with some extra hands, attended to urgent repairs to the attap shelters and improved the sanitary situation in the camp.Much later, when repairs to the railway were completed, he and the other labourers were moved to a camp in Kanchanaburi where the sick received treatment at the evacuation hospital while the rest were sent in batches by train or steamship to their respective locations in Malaya. Those with ragged or torn clothing were provided with new outfits. The joy of returning to his former rubber plantation in Lanchang, Pahang, was overshadowed by the sorrow of his grandmother’s death, finding his parents in poor health, and learning that a number of relatives who had gone with him to Thailand had not returned.

**Bug-infested Rice and Morsels of Food**

As if the unhygienic conditions and long hours of backbreaking work, daily beatings and other forms of brutality at the hands of the Japanese captors weren’t enough agony, the labourers and POWs also suffered from poor nutrition and were quickly

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reduced to skin and bones as food was rationed and usually consisted of meagre portions of rancid rice and scraps of fish and vegetables. According to my father K.N. Sellappah, who initially worked under the Japanese Quarter Master in charge of food distribution, initially food allocation for each camp was calculated based on rationing allocated per person per day. Since Thailand had enough rice to meet demand, this commodity was never in short supply. However, other items like vegetables, salted fish, cooking oil and sugar were often scarce in the labourers’ camps.

Prior to the arrival of the workers, food supplies and other essential items were transported in bulk by rail from Singapore and Bangkok to the main depot at the military base in Kanchanaburi. From here, initial supplies to last two to three months were sent to the various camps by hired boats and barges or by trucks along a narrow road. In some cases the supplies were carried on foot to the northern camps by the POWs and labourers. As the rail line progressed, mini diesel locomotives dispatched supplies to the farthest point under construction.

On the Burma section of the railroad, food supplies from Rangoon (now known as Yangon) were sent to the Japanese military camp by rail to Thanbyzayat and thence by army trucks to the labour camps in the south. In the case of the Kra railway project, initial supplies from Chumphon and Kra Buri were transported in trucks via the old mud road and carried on foot to the camps as related by the survivors.

Meals were prepared and served by selected workers designated as cooks under the watchful eyes of the Japanese guards while wives and female children of labourers cleaned and washed cooking utensils. The early morning meal before work commenced was a single serving of watery porridge, rice, yam or sweet potato with sardine, salted fish or fish fries and occasionally topped with stale or grubby vegetables. The labourers were not allowed to return to the camp for lunch, instead, food was sent to the work sites. The evening meal was similar to the morning meal.

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Due to the unhygienic surroundings and humid conditions, stocks of rice in sacks became mouldy and infested with bugs, beetles and borers, emitting a foul odour. Polluted river water was utilised for cooking, which worsened the situation and led to the deterioration of the labourers’ health. Deaths at the camps were a daily occurrence as a result of diseases contracted by the consumption of contaminated water, such as stomach ulcers, typhoid, dysentery and cholera. Labourers were forced by the Japanese guards to eat the small rations served to them regardless whether they wanted to or not. The mortality rate resulting from illness in the camps outstripped the high rate of deaths caused by major accidents at work sites. Eyewitnesses estimated that as many as 40 to 50 corpses – of men, women and children – from the Thai section of the rail line were dumped into mass graves daily. Those in critical condition and motionless were brought out into the open near the mass graves and left exposed to the intense heat and heavy rain until they died. Some were dealt a fatal blow to the head to end their suffering.

Some of the British POWs told the British *Daily Express* in an article headlined “Building the Railway of Death: British POWs Tell the Truth behind the Horrifying Tracks” published on 1 April 2014 that the men sometimes had to live for weeks on little more than a small daily ration of maggot-infested rice with salt. Malaria, dysentery and cholera were rife. They ate snakes and lizards that they managed to catch. “We ate any vegetation we could,” said Sir Harold Atcherley, 95, author of *Prisoner Of Japan*, a war diary that recorded his life as a prisoner of war.

Another plausible reason for the high mortality rate among labourers was the consumption of cheap local *samsu*, a type of liquor prepared by fermenting bamboo shoots, wild herbs and spices in metal drums, that was readily available from indigenous Thais on boats along the River Kwai-Noi where labourers went for their bath after work. In order to alleviate their frustration, body pain and fatigue, labourers who were addicted to toddy in Malaya found it hard to resist the lure of *samsu* regardless of the risks. (In Malaya the sale of toddy

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was legalised by the British authorities in most plantations and in government outlets in the 1930s in order to provide some form of inducement and relaxation after work to retain their workers.) Toddy, which is tapped from the coconut palm tree, has a low alcohol content and is considered invigorating and not harmful to the body if consumed in moderate quantities. According to Raman Manikam5 and Veloo Kanapathy6 from Kuala Krai, Kelantan, who worked on the Kra railway, there were more deaths among the labourers on that line as *samsu* was available from Thai vendors from villages close to the camps. Both men were 20 years old when they left Kota Baru to work on the Kra railway.

Desperate for some solace and escapism from their daily ordeal, some labourers drank excessively, related survivors from the Siam-Burma line. There were also instances of desperate Indian labourers who attempted to commit suicide by throwing themselves into the steep and rocky ravines or jumping into the deep Kwai Noi River. Some attempted to swim downriver when the water level was low. Cases of missing labourers were quite common as construction work intensified and labourers were forced to work longer hours.

Labourers used up their small wages quickly to purchase essentials to avoid losing the money as petty theft was rampant in the labour camps, leading to noisy squabbles. Raja Gopal Munusamy7, from Tanjung Rambutan, Perak, who worked along the stretch near ‘Nam Tok’ camp, could not recall the exact wages he received except that workers were paid less than what was promised and the wages were hardly enough to buy essentials, which were expensive at the Japanese canteen or from the Thai vendors. Samidas Devasahayam8, from Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, whose work involved carrying

5 Interview with Raman Manikam, 2007. He was aged 82 at the time.

6 Interview with Veloo Kanapathy, 2007. He was 82 years old at the time.

7 Interview with Raja Gopal Munusamy, 2005. He was aged 77 at the time.

8 Interview with Samidas Devasahayam, 2007. He was 86 at the time.

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rails and sleepers along the track near ‘Wampo’ camp, recalled receiving wages only in the first few months but nothing after that. According to Arumugam who had often accompanied the Japanese officers during the disbursement of weekly payments to labourers in the ‘Nikkei camp’, wages were paid but irregularly. He said wages were initially paid in the Burmese currency (kyat) but as Thai vendors refused to trade in the currency, subsequent payments were in Thai currency (bhat).

**Mass Graves and Putrefying Corpses**

The number of deaths of workers and labourers on the Siam- Burma railway increased by the day due to accidents, various diseases and malnutrition. Urgent medical facilities were scarce. Workers’ performance rather than safety at work sites was of utmost importance to the captors. Injuries at work sites were common and unless very critical, treatment was only administered at the end of the working day at the camp’s clinic. Major surgeries including amputations, as the final option, were carried out without any anaesthetics, sedatives or painkillers. The patient, in excruciating pain, was strapped to the operating table or held firmly by guards during the procedure. Recuperation period for most injuries was brief and the injured were forced to report for duty before their wounds had fully healed.

British POW Eric Lomax wrote in his memoirs *The Railway Man* of the arrival of civilian labourers:

At first there were thin columns of Asians; Chinese, Indians, Malays, Indonesians, straggling along the main road from Ban Pong towards Kanburi…It was possible even then, with my small knowledge of the events overtaking all of us, to guess that these pathetic labourers would die in enormous numbers and be the biggest victims of the railway.9

9 Eric Lomax, *The Railway Man: A POW’s Searing Account of War, Brutality and Forgiveness*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995, pp, 105-106.

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Out of an estimated 250,000 Asian labourers who worked on the railway, more than 100,000 died. Of the 61,700 POWs, an estimated 18,000 perished. Some reports claimed that Asian workers of South Indian origin alone (from Malaya and Burma) accounted for more than 100,000 deaths. Though this figure could not be verified, it might not be far from the truth as a large number of South Indian workers brought into Burma during the British administration could have died during the construction of the southern section of the railway line in Burma.

After the war, the remains of American POWs and 1,335 Australian POWs were exhumed and repatriated to their respective countries for a dignified burial. The remains of other POWs were relocated to the Allies’ war cemeteries at Kanchanaburi, Chunkai and Thanbyuzayat in Thailand and Burma (see Appendix) while those of the Asian workers putrefied in the jungles and in numerous mass graves.

It is believed that the records of Asian workers and dependents were destroyed by the Japanese just before the official surrender, to eliminate the possibility of post-war criminal proceedings for violation of human rights by the United Nations or the International Criminal Court. Sources estimate that for every POW reported dead, the death toll of registered Asian labourers was six to seven times higher, and did not include unregistered workers and dependents (women and children).

Mass graves for Asian workers were dug by their comrades at various locations not far from the camps along the river, and 100,000 or more corpses were dumped into the pits without any observance of religious or customary rites. Those dying as a result of contracting contagious diseases were brought on bamboo stretchers, doused with oil and set on fire, then dumped into the graves, according to Govindan Ramasamy,10

10 Interview with Govindan Ramasamy, 2005. He was aged 85 at the time.

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from Serendah, Selangor and P. Perumal,11 from Bentong, Pahang, who were ordered to carry out these inhumane acts. Both recounted how decomposed bodies were left in the open until they were stripped to the bones by maggots, red ants and other insects, before the remains were thrown into shallow trenches. They recalled the stench of the rotting bodies made women and children vomit and unable to eat for a few days. They also related how Indian teenage girls and young women often hid themselves during the nights for fear of being harassed or molested by drunken guards patrolling the camps.

**Bones Unearthed**

The existence of mass graves was first exposed in 1990, according to an *International Herald Tribune (IHT)* report on 11 March 2008 headlined “Trying to honour Asians who died making Death Railway”. Journalist Thomas Fuller had visited the site on hearing that a mass grave had been discovered near Kanchanaburi. There, he met a Thai resident from the neighbourhood, 78-year-old Urai Bosap, who remembered having witnessed as a teenager, corpses of Asian labourers being thrown into mass graves where a small orchard of banana and lime trees now stands. Pointing out the site, she recounted that some workers were still alive and were groaning when thrown into the graves. Knowing what lay buried beneath the orchard she refused to eat fruits from the trees.

*They made a huge pit for the burials. After a few bodies had been tossed, they would add white lime (to avert unpleasant odours) before piling in further layers of the dead. The grave was finally covered with earth. The people were all very dark- skinned and must have been Indians. (International Herald Tribune 2008)*

11 Interview with P. Perumal, 2007. He was 89 at the time.

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Another elderly resident, Tongyu Chalawankumpi who lived not far from the railway line, told the *IHT* he was taken as a teenager from northern Malaya after the Japanese promised his mother a handsome cash payment in return for his labour. He spent two years hammering railway ties and spikes and breaking down rocks. He reportedly said that as he was weakened by disease and feared he might also be thrown into a mass grave, he escaped by jumping into the Kwai Noi River and floated downstream for seven days and nights, clinging to some bamboo, before he was rescued and sheltered by Buddhist monks until Japan conceded defeat. He told the *IHT* that each time the train passed his house, the painful memories of the past came flooding back.

Worawut Suwannarit, a history professor at Kanchanaburi Rajabhat University told the *IHT* he has tried for decades to get more recognition for the Asian labourers who died on the railway. The newspaper reported that in 1990 a Thai charitable organisation, on hearing about a mass grave, dug up part of the area and unearthed more than 500 skeletons. Subsequently, after an inspection team from the Australian Embassy determined that the skeletal remains were not of former Allied soldiers, the charitable group brought the bones to a crematorium in Bangkok for incineration. This reportedly angered Worawut who persuaded the Governor of Kanchanaburi to allow him to examine the excavated site. He pleaded in vain with officials for the mass grave to be made into a museum and memorial for the Asian labourers.

With no funding available, the professor removed 33 skeletons he had unearthed. “I believe there are still more bodies there – a lot, but nobody wants to do anything about it,” Worawut was quoted saying. He handed over the skeletons to the Historical Department in Kanchanaburi Province for safekeeping. After some time, he returned to the department with a reporter to inquire about the skeletons and was told by one of the managers, Pichit Rongrithikrai, that the bones

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had been discarded three or four years earlier as workers and visitors had complained of a stale odour from them. Pichit had reportedly said the bones were buried near a compost pile in the vicinity. Worawut was disappointed at the apathy shown towards the Asian labourers who had sacrificed their lives for the railway.

According to the *IHT*, some people blamed the British colonial administration before and after the war in both Malaya and Burma – the two countries that provided the most number of labourers to the construction sites, for failing to honour the dead. “The anonymity of those discarded bones is in stark contrast to the neat rows of graves in the splendidly manicured Allied war cemeteries in Kanchanaburi and Thanbyuzyat,” reported the *IHT*. “The Thai government has had little incentive or obligation to honour the dead Asian labourers because few Thais worked on the railway.”

Over time, the numerous unmarked mass graves along the River Kwai Noi and the rail track were covered with dense undergrowth and blended into the landscape. The deaths of the Asian workers were never reported to their families and were only assumed dead when they failed to return home.

The *IHT* reported that after the war, the British colonial government in Malaya distributed a total of $1.5 million to the widows and dependents of those labourers from Malaya who died building the railway. Paula Sellamah Muthu12, from Ampang, Selangor, whose father died working on the railway, recalled she found out much later that her widowed mother had received a sum of $15 on behalf of her father. Paula said her family lived on a plantation in Kedah at the time the payment was made by the expatriate manager. Dependents of other labourers who died could not confirm receiving any payments.

The post-independence government of Malaysia settled its overall claims with Japan in 1967, accepting several million

12 Interview with Paula Sellamah Muthu, 2005.

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dollars as reparations. However, the exact quantum disbursed by Japan has remained a mystery until now. Whether the amount was only meant to compensate the Malaysian government for intrusion, occupation and subsequent war- time destruction of properties, atrocities and trauma caused by the Japanese army in Malaya or whether it included the indemnity payment towards all workers who served on the railway construction seems incomprehensible.

Of the more than 85,000 workers who were drafted from Malaya, 33,000 died, according to Japanese records at the time. Yet little is taught about it in Malaysian history books. And there have been no efforts to find and reclaim the countless bodies that remain in the jungles alongside the railway tracks, the IHT reported. (*International Herald Tribune* 1990)

The discovery of some 400 labourers’ bones in Kanchanaburi was also reported by *Bangkok Post* on 18 November 1990, cited Prof. David J. Boggett from Kyoto Seika University in his article “The Silenced Voices of History: Asian Labour on the Death Railway” (Journal of Kyoto Seika University, No. 25). The find was allegedly prompted by recurring dreams experienced by bike shop proprietor Sampong Chawangai, who contacted teacher Ananaya Watnasayaem, owner of a two-acre plot of sugar cane who had come across skeletons when ploughing his field.

The *Bangkok Post*, reported that Ananaya’s Watnasayaem older sister Le Pailom, then aged 75 “…recalled that when she was about 20 years old, field hospitals for sick Indians, Malayan and Singaporean prisoners of war or slave workers were located on a large piece of land where the Kanchanaburi provincial hall and business area are now located. Every morning the Indians dug a hole in this area to bury dead bodies in the evening. The bodies were simply thrown into the pit and covered with dirt. Some days two or three bodies, some days more than five.”

Boggett stated in his article that a Chinese organisation was called in to investigate the grave and re-inter the bones in an appropriate manner to placate and enable the release of the angry

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spirits. Concerned over the haphazard nature of the excavation, the Thai Government’s Fine Arts Department appointed the Director of Muang Singh Historical Park, Sathapon Khwanyun, to supervise the site. Sathapon Khwanyun published his findings in the *Sinlapa wathanatham* (Art & Culture) magazine’s February 1991 issue. The report stated that this was not the first time mass graves had been unearthed in the area, and such discoveries were a common occurrence. Usually the excavated bones were quietly cremated by Chinese spiritual organisations such as the Jin Siang Tung. The full extent of the burial site may never be known as the owners of nearby properties did not want their land disturbed. Excavations, however, established that the bodies were those of Asian labourers, most probably Indians, and that a considerable number of women and children were among the victims. Information was also gathered from the local community, including a Major Ruamsak Chaigomin who recalled that the Japanese had referred to the Asian labourers as *kulito* (possibly derived from the English word “coolie”) the term they used for Asian labourers.

Boggett also quoted from another report which carried an interview with Thai resident Lek Pailom, on the 1943 cholera epidemic. She was 28 years old at the time and remembered that hundreds of Malayans and Indians had been held during the war in a slave camp located on the land where the remains were found … “I saw the Japanese soldiers digging huge graves into which bodies were dumped. Some were sick but still alive”. Micool Brooke, then a *Bangkok Post* journalist, who later published *Captive of the River Kwae* (Merman Books, 1995) visited the site in Kanchanaburi in the early stages of excavation

and wrote,

The excavated hole measured 20 meters square and was located in a sugar cane field about half an acre in size ... I approached the edge of the grave, unknowing what I expected to see. And yet I also felt a strong sense of embarrassed shame at intruding upon the sorrow-covered grave. And sorrow and remorse did overwhelm me when I looked down and saw

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hundreds of skeletons pressed together, their arms reaching out. They had tried to crawl out of the grave before they finally suffocated to death.

The mass grave was uncovered nearly 50 years after the war when the surrounding areas of Kanchanaburi were being developed. Ghastly as it was, the grave is believed to be the tip of the iceberg on the fate of tens of thousands of labourers as well as women and children, in the numerous camps along the railway.

September 2014, Thai enginner Songiat Winichapan, whom the author met in Kanchanabur recalled that the town was a tiny, rustic, laid-back place with rugged roads and wooden shop houses before the Japanese came to carry out the railway mission. He said:

From destruction to re-construction, Kanchanaburi province has witnessed massive accelerated development that has propelled the town to city status and uplifted the lives of its residents. From a population of 330,000 people in 2006, it has now soared to nearly one million. It may sound harsh to say that the war had eventually benefited the region, but that reality has to be accepted. Today, this once small town is a burgeoning city.

The River Khwae-Noi occasionally swells above its banks to and floods the surrounding areas where the camps once were. But nothing can wash away the callous indignities committed by the Japanese and Korean soldiers. I often wondered how difficult it must have been for the prisoners of war and the labourers to work in such a rugged and hostile environment. The passenger train that ferries tourists from Nong Pladuk, Kanchanaburi and Nam Tok stations only travels one-third of the original track, the rest had been dismantled in the mid-1950s. From Nam Tok, visitors travel by road to HellFire Pass museum. Down a 200-meter slope is the track bed constructed by the POWs through the hills (the Konyu cutting). Remnants of metal rails, rotting sleepers, tools for chipping and boring into rocks for inserting explosives are displayed at the lower face of the cliff. It was here, I was told, that many POWs were brutally beaten to death by Korean guards.

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Songiat said he had heard much about the period of the railway construction from his late parents who had witnessed various incidents. He had also heard stories of the pain, horror and misery of those who died. He believed more mass graves may be unearthed with further development in the area.

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**Life in Malaya under**

**Japanese Rule**

“…Japanese amnesia is also related to… what its troops did in the territories which they invaded and occupied – the atrocities, massacres and other draconian, punitive measures.”1

The Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II is regarded as one of the most gruesome periods in the nation’s history. For the people life under Japanese rule was a grim struggle for survival as the economy grounded to a halt, causing unemployment, shortage of consumer goods, price increases, a thriving black market and widespread corruption.

The arrival of armed Japanese soldiers in towns and the outskirts after they landed on Malayan shores on 8 December 1941 drove fear into the residents, especially the Chinese, due to the animosity the Japanese army had created in mainland China much earlier. Moreover, the community felt the Japanese businessmen sidelined them, favouring the Malays for jobs, and viewed the presence of the Japanese army as a threat to their lives and livelihood. Streets were deserted, schools were closed,

1 Cheah Boon Keng, Memory as History and Moral Judgment: Oral and Written Accounts of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, in P. Lim Pui Huen and Diana Wong (eds.), *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001, p. 32.

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small businesses shut down and foreign-owned operations (plantations, tin and coal mines) were suspended, resulting in mass unemployment. In major towns the Japanese looted provision shops, hardware stores and factories owned by the Chinese community, causing further hardship for the people as prices of commodities soared. Local businessmen resorted to hoarding essential items to curb confiscation by the Japanese army. Rice production had ceased but the occupiers also raided rice mills and took control of the stock to deny the public their staple food in the market. Most of the items looted were meant for the large Japanese army in Malaya and for workers on the railroad construction in Thailand. The situation caused distress and desperation amongst the public, and in order to mitigate the situation the Japanese held dialogue sessions with government officials and representatives from private organisations. Topping the agenda at these meetings with heads of Districts, Labour officers, penghulus and branch representatives from the Oversea Chinese Association and the Indian Independence League in the various states was the recruitment of a massive workforce for the railway projects in Thailand, according to Vachiravel, who was a translator with the Japanese Railway Administration. The Japanese were forceful and pressured those at the meetings to urge men between the ages of 18 and 41 to register for work on the railway projects with the promise of better wages and benefits. State agencies working with private organisations were tasked with meeting the quota for workers required from time to time. The workers were to be informed that their service would be short and they would be allowed to return home upon completion of the projects. Dependents were to receive an allowance of $15 per month, plus a gratuity of $120 and a certificate of service if a worker died. These undertakings were never fullfilled by the Japanese administration.

In order to reduce unemployment, the Japanese issued directives to recruit male workers for earthwork in military projects in the various states. Workers were required to bring

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their own tools and cooking utensils to the site. They were also required to dig wells or collect rain water for their daily use. They were moved from one state to another to work on these projects. The Japanese also urged state agencies to open up land and encourage the unemployed to engage in food cultivation. Many unemployed teachers and low ranking clerks were urged to participate in these projects. Caretakers of foreign-owned companies where production had been suspended were urged to utilise the remaining workers for routine maintenance work and accept compensation of rice provided by the government. When the numbers of workers registered on a voluntary basis were found to be inadequate, the Japanese used forced recruitment tactics. State agencies were unhappy that workers who had served in Thailand for more than six months had not returned and their dependents had not received any allowance as promised. Workers recruited for earthwork in military projects gradually deserted the sites as living conditions became appalling. Many died of malaria, malnutrition and other forms of illness as proper medical treatment was not administered. They were also not keen to move out of their respective state. Despite the offer of $1 per day in 1943 with free food and lodging, which was revised to $20 per day in 1945 with similar benefits, the response was disappointing. The public were not willing to bear the hardship at work sites. Agriculture projects initiated by the Japanese were also not very successful as the unemployed were not keen and instead, preferred to plant cash crops in their backyard or on available land for self-sufficiency. Maintenance work on foreign-owned properties only lasted a short while as

compensation in the form of rice was not forthcoming.

With the continuous dispatch of workers to the railway projects in Thailand and lack of interest in local projects among resident workers, the labour situation in 1944 deteriorated to the point of shortage. As a result, local projects undertaken by the Japanese often stalled. The labour shortage forced the Japanese to offer jobs vacated by men to women. At the start

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of the occupation, the Japanese showed very little interest in female workers, as they were keen to tap the large number of unemployed males. However, this changed when there was a void of male workers and women were employed to fill vacancies. Women with young children and elderly dependents to care for, left behind by men on the railway projects, volunteered for available jobs in order to survive. In addition, with the increasing number of brothels in urban areas, many young and widowed women, in order to overcome their hardship, opted to provide their services in these outlets, which over time resulted in a high rate of syphilis and gonorrhoea infection in the country.

The situation in the rural areas (plantations and villages) declined further, with many people dying of malnutrition and various illnesses. There were no medical services in these areas and this was further compounded by lack of transport facilities to government hospitals in distant towns. Residents had to forage for food and resort to vagrancy. The severe hardship and deprivation sowed mistrust and discontent with the Japanese administration.

At the onset of the invasion and on the orders of Emperor Hirohito, the Japanese soldiers (Kempitai) embarked on a mission of ethnic cleansing, targeting Chinese residents and slaughtering them in the thousands on suspicion of collusion with the Malayan Communist Party which had its roots in China. Their dismembered heads were put on display as a deterrent to the community. Some bled to death after they were stabbed with bayonets. The acts of vengeance and savagery led to the formation of several anti-Japanese resistance groups with the support of the British colonial government. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) which was anti-British and existed prior to the Japanese occupation, felt it was more urgent to temporarily align with British forces to derail the Japanese. Hence, the MCP formed the MPAJA (Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army) under terms and conditions which were acceptable to the British

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Administration. Founded on 18 December 1941, the MPAJA was a paramilitary group comprising mainly ethnic Chinese guerrilla fighters and was the biggest anti-Japanese movement in Malaya and Singapore. Many considered the MPAJA as an offshoot of the MCP as most of its leadership was made up of ethnic Chinese communists.

Britain agreed to provide weapons and training in combat to the MPAJA as well as funding and also other forms of assistance.2 During the initial stages of Japanese occupation in December 1941, a group of more than 100 party members of MPAJA was selected by the MCP to undergo training on clandestine sabotage operations at the ‘101 Special Training School’ in Singapore.3 Throughout the occupation period, the primarily Chinese-composed MPAJA was a constant source of trouble for the occupiers, who in response, viewed all Chinese in the country with suspicion and possible members of the resistance group. Thus, even ordinary Chinese faced extreme brutality from the Japanese.

In one instance of viciousness in mid-1943, Japanese soldiers broke into the home of a Chinese family living on the periphery of Naborough estate, in Sungkai, Perak, and captured the male head of the household and his three teenaged children,

2 On the advice of the British, the MPAJA was not to engage in open conflict against the Japanese but instead to involve in sporadic guerrilla warfare from the remote jungles in several states. Before the final surrender of the British forces in February 1942, the initial recruits of the MPAJA were dispersed to the jungles in the various states of the peninsula. Some of the British army personnel who escaped capture by the Japanese fled to the jungles to join forces with the MPAJA. In December 1943, a treaty was signed between the British and the MPAJA, to enable members of MPAJA to receive orders from Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten’s Southeast Asia Command and to be given military training and supplies in the jungles. For more information on the MPAJA, see Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya (1941-1945): A Social and Economic History*, London: Hurst and Company, 1998, especially Chapter 4 (Ethnic Policies) and Chapter 10 (The End of the Occupation).

3 Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2012, p. 97.

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probably under suspicion of being accomplices of the MPAJA. The family lived in a dilapidated wooden shelter on a plot of land located between the foothills of the dense jungle and the estate boundary. The parents worked as rubber tappers on the estate and in their spare time cultivated cash crops and fruit trees, and raised poultry and other livestock. With the suspension of estate operations in early 1942, the family relied solely on income from farm produce carried on foot to the market in Sungkai town about five kilometres away.

On that ill-fated night, while the family was asleep, a group of Japanese soldiers armed with rifles and bayonets entered the farm, bludgeoned two of the dogs, broke down the front door and dragged the father and the three children out. The woman (known only as Ah Soh to my family) was hysterical and held on to her daughter, pleading for compassion. She fell on her knees and begged the soldiers not to take her only daughter away, but to no avail. Her husband, sons and daughter were dragged out to a waiting army truck. Two of the Japanese soldiers, meanwhile, searched the kitchen for stockpiles of food items intended for the MPAJA. Ah Soh, panic-stricken and wailing, insisted on following her husband and children, but was forced back. She watched as the truck carrying her family drove into the darkness, fearful for their lives and alone in her misery.

On hearing the news of the abduction, my grandmother, Emily Ponnamah, who lived on Naborough estate, went to look for Ah Soh, concerned for her safety and welfare. Emily and Ah Soh had developed a close relationship during the time the estate was in operation. Ah Soh and her husband used to tap the rubber trees opposite the estate staff quarters while their two sons cleaned the porcelain cups and removed the rubber lace from the tapping panel. Over the years, working in the estate with predominantly Indian workers, Ah Soh had become quite fluent in the Tamil dialect which enabled her and my grandmother to interact with ease.

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My grandmother took along her two young daughters and me on that visit to Ah Soh’s farm about 300 metres across from our living quarters. Ah Soh, looking frail and shabbily dressed, rushed out to greet Emily. We entered her house, the air filled with the fragrance of incense from a miniature Buddhist shrine located at the entrance. As we sat on stools around a round wooden table placed on the mud flooring, we noticed two small rooms partitioned with plywood; one on either side of a corridor leading to a small kitchen at the rear end.

With tears in her eyes and her voice choked with emotion, she related the abduction. She pounded her chest, frantic with anxiety over what might happen to her 14-year-old daughter. Ah Soh complained that on occasion the night’s silence was disrupted by gunshots and explosions from the nearby jungles. To Emily’s suggestion that she ask relatives to stay with her for security reasons until the return of her family, Ah Soh said in the prevailing situation none of her relatives in the towns were willing to risk moving in with her.

Ah Soh was aware that the Japanese had much earlier taken away a large group of workers from the estate, including my father, to work on the railway construction and that Emily was experiencing similar distress. Ah Soh found solace in Emily’s company and they shared their sorrows and anguish. Before we left the farm, Ah Soh handed my grandmother a sack filled with fruits, vegetables and tubers.

**Hard Times**

Emily had been having difficulty providing for her family since the departure of her son-in-law Sellappah in late 1942. Her daughter (my mother) had delivered a baby girl a few weeks after Sellappah was taken away, and Emily now had eight mouths to feed. Since my mother was occupied caring for the baby, Emily entrusted her other daughters to attend to the needs of my siblings while she took care of me.

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Rice stocks and other essentials in the house had been exhausted and with no means to purchase sundries, Emily had to resort to collecting edible ferns and wild mushrooms in distant fields and occasionally trespass into plots of land abandoned by labourers who had gone to Thailand, in search of anything edible. She and her daughters often climbed into the main drains and shallow streams in the estate to catch fish, mainly catfish and other smaller species. They also dug into the burrows on the walls of the drains to collect small mud crabs that were plentiful. The haul from their foraging could feed the family for two or three days. Excess fish was marinated with salt and turmeric and sun-dried for future use. The mud crabs were cleaned, pounded with spices in a mortar, and cooked for many hours in boiling water to be used as prophylactic treatment for chest colds and cough.

Faced with financial constraints, Emily gradually sold her poultry in the town market in order to provide the special care needed for my mother and her newborn child. By early 1944 the family was facing a bleak and uncertain future, with food (mainly tapioca or cassava) becoming more scarce by the day. Emily then sought help from Ah Soh, offering to market Ah Soh’s farm produce in town instead of it going to waste. They struck a deal – Emily and her daughters would harvest the fruits and vegetables on Ah Soh’s farm every fortnight and take them to town by bullock cart to sell, for half of the proceeds from the sale. Holding the baskets, the two girls sat on a stack of firewood while Emily and I stood at the rear end of the cart. The three of us would alight at the railway station with two small baskets of papayas, pineapples, bananas, guavas and sugarcane cuttings, in time for the northbound mail train at midday. Emily, meanwhile, proceeded with the vegetables to the wet market.

When the mail train carrying mainly Japanese soldiers and some civilians arrived, my two young aunties, Thilagavathy and Rajeswary, then aged 11 and nine respectively, would balance the baskets on their heads and walk along the platform,

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stopping briefly at each window of the coaches. The Japanese soldiers, without asking the prices of the items, would lean over the windows, toss notes into the baskets and grab what they wanted. By the time the train began to move again, the baskets would be empty except for the currency notes printed with banana plants, popularly known as ‘banana money’ then. Excited but unaware of the purchasing power of the currency, the girls would arrange their collection neatly in denominations and shove them into their dress pockets before setting out to look for Emily. We then followed Emily to the sundry shops where she would purchase basic items for the family, utilising 50 percent of the total collection as agreed with Ah Soh. From the remaining amount, she bought items requested by Ah Soh. Despite the bulk of currency notes, the quantity of sundries purchased was often insufficient to meet the family’s food requirements for two weeks and Emily had to enforce rationing at home. After the shopping was done and a brief brunch of sweet buns and coffee, we made our way back to the estate, taking a shorter route along the jungle edge instead of waiting for the bullock cart.

The following morning, we would accompany Emily to the farm to hand over Ah Soh’s items and the balance money, if any. Along the way we would collect fallen twigs and branches which Emily would cut into lengths for use in Ah Soh’s kitchen. This mutually beneficial arrangement between Emily and Ah Soh continued for some time, but the harvest from the farm gradually declined, as Ah Soh could no longer replant fresh crops and manage the farm on her own. Anticipating hard times ahead, Emily planted in her small backyard, cassava, yam, sweet potatoes, spinach and other vegetables sourced from the farm, to feed her family.

The other estate residents, about 70 out of the original 200 or so people, mostly the elderly, wives and children left behind by the men taken away to work on the railways, were also living in abject poverty. Not only did they have to endure an indefinite separation from their breadwinners toiling abroad,

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they also had to overcome adversities to ensure their own survival. They too had to scan the fields, drains and waterways in their quest to survive. Treated water and electricity supply in the estate had been suspended since the Japanese invasion. The only source of untreated water were the disused wells and nearby streams. For lighting at night, small oil lamps or split coconut shells with oil and wick were used. Medical treatment was no longer available. As the situation worsened, so did the health of the estate residents, resulting in deaths of children and adults due to malaria, typhoid, dysentery and malnutrition. The estate’s elderly hospital assistant known as Fernandez earned an income by cycling to the Chinese villages to provide treatment. He would return to the estate very late at night and was under no obligation to offer free medical treatment to the residents. In case of emergency, the only mode of transport to the hospital in Sungkai was a single bullock-cart owned by a retired factory watchman named Muthu who earned a living by transporting firewood to shops daily, setting off early in the morning and only returning at dusk.

Emily occasionally advised the other estate residents on traditional medicine for minor ailments. She also informed the elderly estate chief clerk, Poolosingam, of any deaths. Poolosingam was standing in for the expatriate manager who had gone on leave prior to the Japanese invasion. Emily would also find out from Poolosingam the latest news on developments in Thailand, aired by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in London, which he received on his clandestine radio set. The only news she could gather from the chief clerk was that daily deaths of men, women and children from starvation, diseases and torture were on the rise in the camps but there was no indication of the return of the survivors. As my father had headed a group of 120 workers from the estate, the families left behind felt he was responsible for the welfare of the workers and their safe return. Occasionally, they confronted Emily for

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news of their loved ones abroad not realising that she too was unaware of the situation in Thailand.

In mid-1944, Emily received news from the chief clerk that despite the completion of the railway, it would take much longer for the labourers to return as they were engaged in repairing rail tracks and bridges damaged by Allied air bombings. She relayed the information to the other estate residents and Ah Soh. Later the same year, there was an outbreak of malaria and dysentery in the estate due to poor sanitary conditions and polluted water. Emily provided herbal remedies made from the extracts of papaya leaves, margosa/neem and moringa oliefera, and other concoctions to the estate residents and to her own family. When the condition of the sick was serious and beyond her help, she would pressure the hospital assistant to provide assistance or summon the bullock-cart driver to take them to hospital. However, some of the critically ill, especially the elderly and infants, did not recover. If not for her concern and

persistence, many more might have perished.

A few months later the author too contracted malaria. When it was clear herbal remedies had no effect, my grandmother carried me on her back wrapped in a blanket to the hospital assistant’s house at night under the faint light of a hurricane lamp. He administered an injection, advising Emily to take me home and sponge me frequently with a wet towel in order to cool the fever.

Two days later, there was a swelling the size of a ping-pong ball at the site of the injection which had become infected. Emily took me to the hospital where a bespectacled young Japanese doctor made a small incision at the affected site to release the pus inside. He then used forceps to remove a tiny metal object embedded in the wound. It was a broken bit of needle that had caused the inflammation. Emily admitted that I had earlier received an injection at a private hospital, but did not reveal the identity of the person who administered it I was discharged three days later after the wound healed.

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Some time later I went along with Emily by train to seek assistance from her close relatives who lived in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur and her son S.K.Vachiravel who lived in the government quarters near the King Edward VII school (the Japanese army garrison then), in Taiping, Perak.

In September 1945, Emily was told by the estate’s chief clerk that the war had ended and survivors were being repatriated in stages. Ecstatic, she hurried to convey the good news to Ah Soh who wept with joy on hearing it. She then told the other estate residents. The news evoked mixed feelings – elation on knowing the war was over and apprehension as it was uncertain who would make it home.

Three months later, in early December, the first batch of 20 workers (some with dependents) from the 120 workers taken away, arrived by goods train, followed by another group of 22 workers about a fortnight later. Emotions ran high among those who rushed to greet the returning workers. Families could hardly recognise their kin at first, as the survivors bore the scars of their harrowing, brutal experiences and the abuse suffered at the hands of their captors. Many of them appeared gaunt, malnourished and traumatised. Some had wounds or deep scars or were disfigured. On arrival at the estate the survivors were swarmed by the residents who listened in shock to stories of the workers’ experiences on the Death Railway and the treatment by their Japanese captors. Their families in turn, related their own mishaps and loss of dependents during the period of estrangement. The reunion was intensely emotional and sorrowful.

Emily waited for an opportunity to approach every one of the survivors to enquire about my father, but was disappointed by the responses. The earlier group told her that on their arrival in Kanchanaburi, they were reassembled into smaller groups and dispatched on foot to distant camps under the direction of Japanese guards, and never saw my father after that. In the second group, the former expatriate manager’s gardener,

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Sannasi, claimed to have noticed him in the company of Japanese guards at their camp on one or two occasions while the rest were unaware of his movements. They said spotting a comrade in a camp or at the worksite was like trying to find a needle in a haystack. They also had no news about the remaining workers and dependents, which left Emily and the other families despondent and despairing of ever seeing their loved ones again.

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**The Survivors Finally**

**Make it Home**

My father, K.N. Sellappah1, came home in early 1946, some six months after the Japanese surrendered. About the same time, thousands others also made their way home. The repatriation of workers from Kanchanaburi started in December 1945 and continued until July the following year. The Allied Forces took control of the railway operation to ensure the disrupted sections of the railroad and bridges were repaired, mainly to facilitate the transfer of surviving POWs, labourers and the critically ill to the hospitals near Kanchanaburi and Thanbyuzyat. Together with the Japanese soldiers, who were now captives, and Asian labourers, the Allied Forces took six to eight months to get the line to function effectively.

Armugam Kandasamy, who was at the camp near the Burma border, described the Japanese soldiers as “visibly demoralised and hung their heads in shame. One officer tried to hold back his tears when he told me that their authority had ended and that their fate was uncertain”. Loke Wing Yew, who was sent to several camps along the Burma line of the railway, recalled:

1 Interview with K.N. Sellappah, 2005. He was aged 91 at the time.

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It was incomprehensible how the Allied soldiers controlled their anger and did not retaliate for the brutal treatment they had endured and the deaths of their comrades. The Japanese and Korean guards should have been made to experience a taste of the torture they had vented on their captives. We labourers could only curse them and wished they would repent for their atrocities towards other human beings. (Loke 2007)

The Allied Forces provided the labourers with good food, medical care, stipulated working hours and resting time. According to some survivors, local Thais who had ‘an axe to grind’ with the Japanese over their contemptuous and provoking incidents in Chumphon and Nong Pladuk, encroached into the camps during the night to create a ruckus, but the intervention of the Allied soldiers saved the Japanese soldiers from further embarrassment.

While sections of the railroad were undergoing repairs, those critically ill were transported to hospitals near Kanchanaburi and the neighbouring areas for treatment by army doctors flown in from India and Allied Forces medical personnel. There were some 25,000 labourers, apart from the thousands incapacitated in various camps, who were able to continue repair works along the Thai section of the rail track. On the Burma line there were 40,000 or more labourers still in camps, including the sick and injured. According to Loke, many labourers from the northern section deserted their camps during the night.

Only when the reconstruction of several sections of the main railway line and bridges was completed about six months after the Japanese surrender were the workers transferred to Kanchanaburi. The workers were brought in batches of hundreds from as far as the Burma line some 300km north and from the camps along the line to the transit camps and the Indian Army hospital in Kanchanaburi and Tamarkan. The British Military Administration (BMA) assigned matters concerning repatriation to the Civil Affairs Section (CAS), which was responsible for assembling workers, conducting census and determining their

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mode of travel and destination. Since the Japanese had destroyed all records related to workers, the authorities faced difficulty determining which camps along the railway the workers belonged to. Men, women and children who were seriously ill or injured (many on stretchers, and some using walking aids) and needed further treatment were referred to the hospitals. Once the workers undergoing intensive treatment in hospitals (some took weeks or longer) recovered and were fit to travel, they were moved to the transit camps where they were quarantined. For the first time in three years the workers felt they were treated as human beings – meals in the transit camps were adequate, the water was clean, sanitary conditions were satisfactory and bathing facilities were provided.

As transit camps were vacated, more workers were transferred in stages from labour camps further north for processing. Workers had to first disembark at Nong Pladuk junction, find shelter in dilapidated camps before boarding the train from Bangkok to the west coast states of Malaya and Singapore. Some were housed in vacant buildings for weeks before boarding steamships bound for Singapore and Penang. The labourers were given $5 each by the British authorities to meet travel expenses.

Workers on Kra railway line, left on their own after the Japanese and Korean soldiers abandoned the sites ahead of the official surrender when the line was no longer serviceable following assaults by the Allied bombers, waited for assistance but abandoned the camps when food became scarce. They trudged along the track bed over a long distance to reach Chumphon to seek humanitarian aid from local residents, mosques and Buddhist temples. These workers had earlier, under orders of the Japanese guards, dismantled the serviceable metal rails and sleepers and moved the materials for use on the main line. The sick and disabled remained in the camps and sought food in nearby Thai villages until the surrender, after which the British authorities sent a team from Chumphon to provide assistance.

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According to Vellusamy Kalliappan, **the repatriation process from Chumphon was quite haphazard**. Except for workers undergoing treatment at the hospital and those with families who waited for the authorities to organise onward transport, some workers from the east coast states looked for fishing vessels bound for Kota Baru and Kuala Terengganu, while he and five others from the west coast states as far as Kulai, Johor, trekked along the railway line, and hitched rides on passing trucks. Relating the exhausting journey, Vellusamy said, “The Thai villagers along the way were very sympathetic and generous; they offered us food, water and shelter for the night.” Despite the torrential monsoon rains which soaked them to the skin for long periods, they reached Alor Setar, Kedah after four days, with blistered soles and tired legs. Those from other distant states reported at the District Office requesting onward transport to their destinations.

Upon reaching his village, Vellusamy was devastated to find his wooden house occupied by a new tenant who told him that after the death of his father two years earlier, his mother and siblings had moved to Sungei Petani, some 50 km away, to be with his uncle. Vellusamy managed to locate his mother to learn that his elder brother Kolandasamy had been taken by the Japanese a few months after him, probably to work on the major line, leaving behind his young wife who was expecting their first child. “My brother did not return and presumably died there.” On the advice of his mother and uncle, he married his brother’s young widow. He found work in a Chinese rubber smallholding and also supplied firewood to households and shop houses to supplement his income and provide education for his five children.

**My Father’s Three-year Ordeal**

The day Sellappah arrived home in Nabarough rubber estate near Sungkai, Perak, was one of joy and excitement for my

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family. He arrived on a bullock cart with sacks of rice, sugar and flour which the Japanese had issued as optional compensation in lieu of wages. His physical condition shocked the family, and my mother broke down when she saw how frail and emaciated he had become, with pronounced cheek bones and sunken eye sockets. His collarbones and ribs stuck out under his shirt, revealing severe malnutrition There were dark patches on his torso, presumably due to fungal infection, and lacerations around his waist, which he said were from the jungle vines or cords from gunny sack material he had used to secure his pants. Eyes brimming with tears, he hugged us.

Meanwhile, a small crowd had gathered outside the house, anxious for news of their missing family members. My father recounted his suffering and advised those gathered to remain hopeful as the repatriation exercise was still in progress. Over the next few days, while my father recuperated, he heard from my grandmother (Emily) the challenges and difficulties our family had to overcome while he was away. He also told of his ordeal during his three years in captivity.

In October 1942, Sellappah, aged 30 at the time, was among a group of 120 men from Nabarough estate selected by the Japanese soldiers to work on the Thai–Burma railway, although the men were not aware where they were heading nor of the task ahead. Two months earlier, the workers who were facing severe food shortage had been told of jobs available at a location in the north (Thailand was not mentioned) with guaranteed wages ($1 per day’s work), free meals and accommodation as well as benefits such as leave every five or six months with free passage by train. The offer was made by Japanese officers in the presence of District Officers and officials from the Indian Independence Movement, and conveyed to the workers through the chief clerk of the estate.

Sellappah was instructed to inform the other workers of the offer and to make arrangements for them to register at the Labour office. The response, however, was lukewarm; only

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a few workers were interested while the rest were sceptical, although most of them had to plant cash crops (tapioca, yam, and sweet potatoes) on any available land around their quarters and between rubber trees to overcome the food shortage and to be self-sufficient.

Without any warning, however, a convoy of Japanese armoured cars and trucks with armed soldiers on bicycles arrived late one night and cordoned off the estate.

The rumblings of the vehicles woke the entire household. From the top floor window of the house I saw the convoy had occupied the full stretch of the mud road opposite the house. Early the next morning, a Japanese soldier went to the chicken coop behind the house and gestured to my mother-in-law that he wanted eggs. Out of fear, she handed him a basket of eggs which he took with a nod. Minutes later, he returned with a carton filled with biscuits, chocolates, canned fruits and condensed milk. (Sellappah 2005)

A short while later, two Japanese officers appeared and ordered Sellappah to bring the workers’ register and follow them to their quarters. He noticed a large group of soldiers relaxing under the rubber trees. The officers instructed him to assemble all the male workers and to make sure at least one able-bodied member from each household was ready to board the trucks in two hours. After 120 workers were identified, the officers told Sellappah he was to lead the group. Sellappah’s plea to be allowed to defer his departure as his wife was pregnant fell on deaf ears. He went home, packed some clothing and other essentials, and after assuring his family he would return soon, left to report to the Japanese officers.

The other workers (some with families) soon joined him, their weeping families hovering some distance away. They were ordered to board the truck and taken to the Sungkai Labour office to be registered and issued with identification cards bearing numbers and date of registration. Sellappah said the identification number issued to him was 3062. His

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queries on where they were headed received no response. When registration was over, the Japanese officer collected the list of workers and left, while armed guards led the workers to the Sungkai railway station where they boarded a northbound freight train along with other Indian workers from neighbouring estates.

When the train reached Ipoh at dusk, they were given a meal of rice, vegetables and strips of salted fish dished out from huge woks by the Japanese guards. More workers (Indians, Chinese and Malays) boarded the train, which was by then overcrowded. Sellappah estimated there were at least 600 people on the train. Some had to squat on the metal floor throughout the night journey to the Padang Besar border station. He said the workers were confused and panicked when the train crossed the border into Thailand and did not stop till it reached Nong Pladuk station.

From there, Sellappah and the others were taken on open trailers loaded with sleepers and rails to a point from which they trekked to the main camp in Kanchanaburi. There, they were given a meal and crude working tools and further instructions on the onward journey and the tasks ahead. Some of the workers complained of fatigue, and many were taken aback by the tough assignment ahead, but the protests were quickly quelled by the growling Japanese and Korean guards wielding bamboo batons – an indication, said Sellappah, of what was to come. The senior guard then randomly chose 20 men and placed them in Sellappah’s charge. The rest were led away under tight security. It saddened him to see weary men, women and some children burdened with belongings and working tools setting out in military style formation.

His group was assigned to various tasks – restacking tons of food items for delivery to the various camps, maintaining the internal network of mud roads, ensuring the daily discharge of garbage and routine spraying of disinfectants among other tasks. Except for an hour’s break for lunch, they had to work until

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6.00 in the evening regardless of the occasional downpours pelting down on them. The Japanese guards showed no empathy and often yelled out their displeasure when the pace of work slackened. Sellappah noticed a large group of Thai contract workers nearby taking their time building bamboo and attap structures whereas the foreign workers were shouted at and discriminated against.

One time, two workers (Veloo and Naidu) contracted diarrhoea and did not report for work. When the Korean guard realised their absence, he ordered me to accompany him to their camp where he slapped and punched them and forced them to go to the work site. Then, in a fit of anger, he shoved the sharp end of his bamboo baton into my ribs. The guard stood over the two labourers as they worked, and only when he noticed excreta trickling down their legs and their wobbly state did he signal me to refer them to the army hospital nearby. When others in the group laid down their tools to indicate their resentment, the guard wielded his baton, forcing them to resume work. I couldn’t stomach the indignities and compulsion enforced on us. (Sellappah 2005)

Sellappah rushed to the hospital and reported to an elderly Japanese doctor that two workers needed treatment urgently. The doctor immediately dispatched his men with stretchers. Sellappah also complained to the doctor about the Korean guard’s brutal manner. A short while later, a Japanese guard who appeared to be more compassionate replaced the Korean guard. “For almost six months up till March 1943, we had to bear the humiliating and atrocious behaviour of the Korean guard,” he recalled.

During that time, more workers from Malaya, Singapore and Java arrived weekly or fortnightly in the thousands. The others in his group were ordered to join a batch of workers (mainly from Kedah and Penang) sent as additional reinforcements to various camps along the railway. Shortly after, Sellappah was assigned to the labour camps in the north as the visiting Medical Officers (Allied Forces) had submitted scathing reports on the high

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mortality rate of labourers and attributed it to the unhygienic conditions in the camps and kitchens. Sellappah was told to report to the officers in command at the camps, organise and carry out sanitary measures to rectify the situation.

Sellappah packed his belongings and with two Korean guards boarded a barge overloaded with food supplies to camps along the Kwai-Noi River. After trekking through dense clumps of bamboo, they arrived at Tarsau camp where the Japanese officer told him that work on the section of the rail track was almost complete and the workers would soon be moved to a new location further north. He said Sellappah’s visit was too late but still, he allowed Sellappah to check the kitchen and the camp surroundings.

The ground between the labourers’ huts and surroundings was littered with garbage and covered with flies and insects. There was no proper drainage and no latrines. Human waste was discharged in the bushes nearby and the odour was unbearable, made worse by the stench from the corpses in shallow pits nearby. (Sellappah 2005)

The kitchen area was also buzzing with flies. The main source of water for cooking and drinking was from the murky river some distance away. Sellappah noticed the broken rice in open sacks was in chunks, mouldy and smelled bad. The cook told him the chunks of rice were placed in boiling water without breaking them to hasten the cooking process. He was denied entry to the attap huts nor was he allowed to speak to the sick and injured labourers lying on raised bamboo platforms, some of them moaning and groaning,

Sellappah told the Japanese officer 10 workers were needed daily, mainly for sanitary work before the next visit by the Medical Officer. The officer appeared unconcerned and agreed to spare four workers, saying railway construction was his priority. Sellappah later joined the guards for the day’s meal which consisted of better quality rice. It was clear to him that the labourers were badly neglected.

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Only the cooks and their helpers appear to have good food and extra hours of rest. The following morning, he set out for the next camp at Tonchau where the situation was worse. The Japanese officer said there was a labour shortage due to heavy casualties and could only consider sanitary measures when more labourers arrived. At another camp at Tempie, Sellappah received a cold shoulder from the stern-looking officer who said his priority was to complete the railway within the set time frame. The officer’s sarcastic remark that all the 1,000 workers could be put to work during the night to sanitise the camp showed a total disregard for the concerns of the Aliied medical authorities.

Receiving a similar response from the Japanese officer at the next camp near Konyu, Sellappah showed his assignment letter to the Chinese medical officer who was from Singapore and confessed that his efforts so far had been futile. The doctor felt sorry for Sellappah but did not want to intervene. He attended to the blisters on Sellaappah’s feet and allowed him to tag along as he treated the alarming number of sick and wounded. Most of them wore only a loincloth stained with excreta and lay motionless while some were crouched over in pain. The mud flooring was strewn with vomitus and litter, covered with swarms of flies and various insects. The dead were moved to the open area nearby and left there until there were enough corpses for a mass burial. The air was thick with the stench of rotting flesh.

**Back-breaking Work of Reconstruction**

Sometime in April 1943, an air raid by Allied bombers damaged a stretch of the railway track near Konyu, and Sellappah was ordered to lead a team of 30 labourers to repair the track bed which had gaping holes, replace the twisted and buckled rails and shattered sleepers and complete the task by dusk. The site at Konyu housed two huge camps for the large number of Allied

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POWs and labourers, which were separated by the dense jungle. A major impediment to the rail track was a stretch of contiguous rocky hills where a wedge had to be carved out manually as passage for the railway, referred to as ‘Konyu Cutting’ or ‘Hellfire Pass’. This hazardous operation was entrusted to the POWs whilst more than 500 labourers were assigned to dig into the face of steep slopes over a long distance towards the hills, level the area and consolidate the track bed before laying the sleepers and rails. The guards kept close watch over the workers, shouting commands and brandishing their batons. The slightest slackening was met with a forceful strike of the baton on the bare backs of labourers. In the sweltering heat and occasional thunderstorms, most of the labourers’ clothes had worn down to rags and loincloth. The callous treatment and abuse at the work site, especially from the Korean guards, often resulted in serious injuries. Those who collapsed from exhaustion were left unattended and when they regained consciousness were forced to resume work. The labourers were made to work through the night under the faint illumination of bamboo torches.

Labourers who worked close to the hills were often caught unaware when debris from rocks blasted by dynamite rained down on them, causing serious injuries. Some of the labourers who had a full view of the location related to Sellappah the inhumane torture and suffering inflicted on the POWs. Under carbide lights and bamboo torches they were pressured to work till very late at night. Some of the POWs were believed to have been tortured to death while removing tons of soil and broken rocks from the area using stretchers or sacks suspended from bamboo poles and carried over the shoulders.

While working along the track bed, I noticed some low, narrow bamboo cages at the POW camp. My first guess was that they were traps for small animals for their meat. Later, I was told by a medical attendant named Krisnasamy Karuppiah, that POWs were made to crouch in these cages for hours as penalty for defiance or misconduct. He also said that beside these cages was a wooden cross-bar from which

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POWs were hung by the legs and flogged for the slightest act of insubordination. (Sellappah 2005)

(After returning home following the Japanese surrender, Sellappah and Krishnasamy who lived on opposite estates near Siliau, Negeri Sembilan, would meet occasionally to reminisce about the years of suffering and hardship under the Japanese). At the camp food supplies from Kanchanaburi became scarce and meals were reduced to porridge topped with roasted fish fries or strips of salted fish. Occasionally, cassava or tapioca, yam, sweet potato or young bamboo shoots were served. The death toll, mainly due to cholera, dysentery and typhoid, continued to rise by the day and the corpses were often left to putrefy in the open before they were buried in mass graves. The Japanese authorities appeared to be totally unconcerned about the situation even as the medical team struggled with inadequate facilities and medical supplies. The labourers thought they too

would likely meet a similar fate as their dead comrades.

While in Konyu, Sellappah was taken ill with malaria and conjunctivitis. Confined to bed for almost two weeks, Sellappah saw corpses of men with shrunken skin and protruding bones removed and their spaces quickly taken up by new patients. One labourer named Palanisamy from Kulai, Johor, was being treated for gangrene in his foot. He told Sellaappah he had seen sick men being administered lethal injections, then froth at the mouth and die. He also said that in another camp, many workers who were dying from transmittable diseases were moved to a different hut which was set ablaze at night and the charred remains then disposed of in shallow dugouts or in the river. These stories sent shivers down Sellappah’s spine and made him fear for his own life

When the passage through the hills was completed, the POWs were transferred further north to Takanum to rebuild a massive bridge while the labourers laid sleepers and rails. Cave-ins and landslides often disrupted their work. By then, the

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manpower had been reduced drastically due to heavy casualties and the Japanese stepped up pressure on the remaining labourers in order to meet their targets.

When the entire stretch of the railway from Kanchanaburi to Thanbyuzayat was completed, the Japanese celebrated over a number of nights. Although the workers were relieved that their work was over, there was no respite as they were put on daily watch to ensure there were no obstructions on the railway., The merriment for the Japanese and Koreans was cut short by air raids by Allied bombers which caused extensive damage to major sections of the rail track and major bridges. As the workforce of POWs and labourers had dwindled substantially, the Japanese regime had to bring in more workers from Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia to repair the damage and restore communications by rail to the main Japanese camp at Thanbyuzayat in Burma. Some of the new arrivals on noticing the labourers’ tattered clothing, offered their spare clothes.

Despite the arrival of additional labour, the horrible sanitary conditions in the camp, inadequate food supply, and poor medical treatment resulting in daily deaths were unchanged and in fact, worsened. But the intensity of repair operations increased as the guards worked the labourers late into the night, bashing those who slackened. Repair works were more stressful and painstaking than the construction of a fresh track. The damaged rails and sleepers had to be removed before huge cavities were filled with soil carted manually from distant locations.

Sellappah recalled the air raids by Allied bombers usually targeted sections of the track where there were no human activities and the tremors could be felt over a great distance. At the sight of any low flying aircraft, the traumatised labourers ignored the guards’ commands and took cover in the jungle. The air strikes continued until mid-1945. Finally, on 15 August 1945, leaflets dropped from the air announced the surrender of the Japanese forces.

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**Picking Up the Pieces**

In Malaya, the situation gradually returned to normal following the surrender of the Japanese forces, and the communists’ decision to suspend their guerrilla activities. Schools re-opened and private businesses (plantations, tin mines, construction, etc.) were revived. My father decided to relocate the family to Degong division of Teluk Anson Rubber Estate Ltd., (under the Manager cum Director Lt. Cmdr. C.T de. B. Whitehouse), further north near Langkap, a small town between Teluk Anson and Kampar, Perak.

Before we moved out from Naborough estate, Emily, my father and I went to see to thank Ah Soh for helping the family and to bid her farewell. Her husband and second son had returned but the fate of the other two children was unclear. She was depressed and agitated upon learning that her husband had lost contact with the other children after their arrival in Kanchanaburi and did not know where they had been taken.

Later that afternoon, Emily met the estate’s residents, some of whom were still agitated and fearful for their missing loved ones. The news of my family’s impending departure added to their sadness, as many of them were fond of Emily and appreciated her care and concern for their welfare. They remembered how she had attended to the needs of those who fell sick and generously gave out herbal medication whenever it was needed.

In 2004, when the author learnt about the revival of the association for the victims of the Death Railway, Sellappah was persuaded to join the association. Two years later he passed away, at the age of 92.

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**The Forgotten Men of History**

They are the silenced victims of the Death Railway, the corpses in their tens of thousands still lying in shallow pits along the 415km railway line from Kanchanaburi to Thanbyuzayat and from Chumphon to Kra Buri, buried in dense undergrowth. There are no longer any records of their part in the building of the railway not any tangible memorial to remember them by. These were the more than 100,000 Asian labourers the Japanese sent to their deaths in their haste to build the Siam-Burma railway to further their war efforts. Despite the immense human cost of its construction the railway was demolished after World War

1. Only about a quarter of it, in Thailand, was later reopened. As one of the most barbaric episodes of World War II,

the Death Railway is said to be a remarkable feat by Japanese engineers, but it earned gruesome notoriety for the ruthless determination of its architects to have it completed on time. That period is counted as a war crime by Japan in Asia. The Anzac portal states that between June 1946 and July 1947 a total of 111 Japanese and Korean soldiers were convicted in Australian war crime trials for crimes on the Thai–Burma railway, and death sentences were given to 32 of these men. Many of the Japanese soldiers who were sentenced to death were said to have maintained a pride in their service to the emperor.

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The stretch of land in Thailand and Burma where the railway was built, witnessed the loss of tens of thousands of civilian lives as well as POWs. Even the large herd of elephants brought in to haul huge volumes of logs for sawing into sleepers and for the construction of mammoth bridges was overworked, undernourished and left to perish in the jungle. The River Kwai- Noi that winds along most of the railway and which was the only source of water for the workers at the camps was heavily polluted with human secretions and decomposed remains left tied and hanging from protruding roots along the banks. The labour camps along the railway from Kanchanaburi to Thanbyuzayat are where the skeletal remains of Asian workers lay in thousands of pits, trenches and shallow graves.

Today, there are three well-maintained cemeteries dedicated to the POWs – two in Kanchanaburi district, Thailand, and one in Thanbyuzayat, Myanmar. But for the Asians who perished, there is not one monument. **The latest memorial in honour of those who died building the railway was unveiled on 29 November 2017 at the JEATH Museum, in Kanchanaburi. The memorial was the initiative of concerned Japanese citizens, led by Okita Kazunaga**, former head of the Japanese School in Rangoon (Yangon), who erected a similar monument at Thanbyuzyat, Burma in 2016. The organising committee of the unveiling ceremony comprised representatives from the Japanese media such as Nagoya Broadcasting Co. and Asahi newspaper as well as other organisations such as Thai- Nichi Institute of Technology, Bangkok University and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JAICA), and David Boggett from Kyoto Seika University, among others.

The railway has been the subject of novels and films as well as a large number of personal accounts of POW experiences. More recently, an hour-long documentary on the Asian slave labour exploited by Japan for the railway was produced by Singapore-based Nadodigal Creations. Directed by Kurunjivendan Rajagopalan, and released in 2014, it featured the stories of some of the survivors from Malaysia.

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Most of the survivors in Malaysia and the next-of-kin of those who gave their lives for the railway have **voiced their wish for a memorial to be erected on Malaysian soil** in honour of those “whose sacrifice is of historical significance” as survivor and retired deputy superintendent of police V. Alagasu, put it. Since the Japanese had destroyed the records of labourers just before the surrender, it is not clear how many workers from Malaya and Singapore actually returned. According to Hugh V. Clarke, author of A Life for Every Sleeper: *A Pictorial Record of the Thai-Burma Railway*, the official history of the 2/19 Battalion records state that of the 270,000 Asians impressed to work on the railway, only 30,000 were ever traced or repatriated after the Japanese surrender. Clarke cites the Australian official war history The Japanese Thrust’s estimates of civilian death toll as between 70,000 and 90,000. “The ratio of deaths was approximately one in every four for prisoners of war, one in every three for Asian labourers and one in every 13 for the Japanese.” It is estimated that around 30,000 or more (including deserters) eventually returned to Malaya and Singapore.

Of this number, around 10,000 were said to have registered with the first Death Railway Association established in 1958, which sought to seek compensation for the survivors. However, by 2004, the number of survivors had dropped to about 300, and in 2017, only 15 of them could be traced. The first association formed by the survivors made several attempts to seek reparation, but these efforts were to no avail. Successive interest groups also failed to make any headway on this issue. But no length of time can obscure history and no quantum of reparation can bring relief or heal the scars of the Asian workers and POWs in the ill-fated railway mission.

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