

Aileen’s Childhood Memories – From Singapore to Ireland

By Sister Aileen Coates (known in Portugal as Sister Aedris)

The Society’s 38th Annual Report and Review, published in 2011, included an article entitled “Portugal and the End of the British Empire – Two Stories”. One of these personal stories, “Aileen’s Childhood Memories – Singapore” told only the first part of the story of one British family’s travels after the fall of Singapore. The whole story is now published below.

When WWII broke out, Aileen Coates (better known in Portugal as Sister Aedris of the Convento de Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso, Belém) was a young girl living in Singapore with her parents and her four siblings. Aileen’s story begins in late 1941, when Singapore was on the point of falling to the Japanese and her mother, together with her five children were about to be evacuated on a British ship, leaving their father to await internment under Japanese occupation.



Sister Aedris, photographed at Bom Sucesso in 2016.

“Come and see the very bright lights!” called my parents. I scrambled out of bed pulling at the mosquito net and rushed out through my parents’ room on to the lounge veranda, down the steps, through the opening, under the house and on to the terrace. The sky was ablaze with yellow and red lights. “Is it fireworks? Is it a practice?” The scent from the frangipani, chicoos and rambutan trees all mingled together and wafted around us in the warm air. It was the night of 7th December 1941. The Japanese had already bombed Pearl Harbour and Singapore was on the alert.

I remember the next morning going with Mother to buy material to make black-out curtains for the windows. Our house was a large bungalow type, built on columns so that the air circulated underneath and kept it cool. We children played here quite freely and now Father had got a part of it made into an air-raid shelter - the part under the front nursery. It was enclosed with sandbags and inside was placed the table tennis table with a large mattress on top, and a carpet underneath it on the floor. Whenever we heard the warning sirens of an air raid we went to this shelter. If there was no sound of planes or anti-aircraft guns, we sat on chairs in this little “room”. I remember we pinned holy pictures on the wooden beams and prayed the Rosary during a raid.

In January, the schools did not reopen. I went to school in the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus run by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur – a beautiful building, or rather many buildings enclosed by a wall. They occupied a huge block in front of the Good Shepherd Cathedral. The Convent Church is still there, but it is now part of a shopping mall. Terry and Denis went to St. Joseph’s School run by the De la Salle Brothers – another beautiful building in a block opposite one side of the Cathedral. This building is still there and the beautiful arcade in front is being restored.

Father said we were to continue our lessons and we set up “school” in the back nursery. Father marked the work we had to do and I remember well that I was doing Algebra from a blue Baker-Browne book on the morning of 29th January 1942, when the siren sounded.

Father had gone as usual to the office in Fort Canning with Flora, who had begun to attend Pitman's College and with Mother, who did the shopping each day in the market on Orchard Road. Terry, Denis, Anne, Amah and I were in the house with Ah Chin, the houseboy, Cookie and his wife and family, Keuben the gardener and Tim, our dog.

I said we had better go to the air raid shelter, which we did and we went under the tennis table because the guns were going off. We heard the sound of the car, a big Hupmobile which had belonged to the Sultan of Johor, coming up the drive and into the garage and then the sound of Mother coming up the steps. Within minutes of Mother coming into the shelter, the bombs exploded above us. I can still hear them – three loud explosions. The side of the table where I was collapsed and I was pressed to the ground, but I could still move. Mother called out to me “Are you alright, darling?” and I replied “Yes”. When all was quiet again, Mother said, “We must get out, children”. She could see a hole of light and thought she could see some smoke too, but it was the fine dust of our broken house. We pushed our way out through the rubble and on to the grass terrace. The bombs had fallen directly on the other side of the bungalow, our parents' bedroom. Mother said “We had better get shelter in case the bombers return to machine gun us”, so we slithered down the steps to the tennis court, which had big holes in it, ran down the drive of the house and on to the road. There were holes in the road, no leaves on the trees, and the telephone wires were big loops touching the ground.

We went to our Chinese neighbours who had built an air raid shelter in the grounds of their house. The shelter was underground and quite full but they made room for us. The women were praying on their Buddhist beads. The “all clear” had not sounded when my Father appeared at the top of the steps to the shelter. At Fort Canning they knew where the bombs were falling, in our area, so Father and other men from the office came quickly to see that we were safe. At the end of Cairnhill Road from Orchard Road Father met Ah Chin, our house boy and Keubun the gardener, who told them that Mem, Missies and

Tuans were safe but in the Chinese shelter. It was good that they had told Father because when he came to our house and saw it destroyed he would have thought that we were all dead.

I can only remember being taken by car to the Doughty's house. My Mother and Father and the men from the office tried to salvage what they could from the house. I think there was very little, because I know I had to wear clothes given to me by Mrs. Dowell.

I think we must have been a week or more in this house, which now was home to fourteen or fifteen people. When the warning siren sounded for a bombing attack and they became more frequent, several times a day, we children would run under the nearest table and begin shouting prayers.

Two memories of this time are about dogs. We found a dog with a litter of the most beautiful puppies which we promptly brought back to the house. The first night they yelped and growled most of the time and kept the men in the house awake, so they said. A day or two later the puppies disappeared and I think one of the men took them away. The other doggie memory is about our darling dog Tim, a little black and white terrier that Uncle Mac had given us. When the house was bombed Tim could not be found but a few days later Uncle Mac found him. He had been cut badly and was very nervous. I remember Uncle Mac brought him to us in his car, but we could not keep him, as we were living with others. So that day, Uncle Mac left with Tim in the back of his car and I turned to the wall of the house and wept bitterly.

We knew that we would have to leave Singapore as non-Singaporean women and children were being sent out and we were waiting for places on a ship. The dreaded day came. I know I could not eat anything. We were driven to the godowns where a big grey ship loomed up in front of us. There was thick black smoke everywhere and a smell of rubber burning. The wharves where the rubber was stored for export had been bombed that day.

We were given a cabin which we shared with another family, but we were lucky, because many people had to find spaces on the decks to sleep. I recall that Flora was badly bitten by bugs – the cleanliness of the ship was not the best. I have a memory of seeing Father walking alone away from the ship in a lane between the godowns and watching him until he disappeared and wondering when I would see him again.

We put on lifebelts and these we kept on all the time, even when we were eating.

That night we sailed out to the “roads” and we were there until the next day, waiting, I think, for other ships as we were to travel in convoy. Our ship was called the *Duchess of Bedford*. It had been turned into a troop carrier, which meant that the lounges were used as sleeping areas with rows and rows of bunks. All the doors leading to decks were covered, so one had to walk through a succession of little corridors to reach the open deck. We were instructed about what to do if the ship was in danger of being bombed. We all had to go to the hold, where there was a possibility of us being safe, as the bombs would explode on the deck. If the ship was being attacked by torpedoes from submarines we were to go to the deck stations. I remember being on deck only once, but went to the hold several times because of attacks from bombers. I especially remember the night when the ship was lying off Surabaya (in Java, now Indonesia). We had to go to the dining rooms just above the ship’s hold. I can still see the women with their children going down the steep steps, the children crying and trailing their teddy bears and toys.

From Indonesia our convoy moved across the Indian Ocean. The ships were in sight of each other but not close together as each vessel moved in a zigzag path to avoid torpedoes and this gave an unpleasant lurch to the movement of the ship. A sad event occurred several times while we were in the Indian Ocean. Young babies died and for their burial the ship slowed down and after a short prayer by the Captain the “coffin” was lowered into the sea. It was very sad for the bereaved mothers.

There were so many people on board that there were three “sittings” for meals. Mother had, with great foresight, packed a basket with plates, cups and cutlery, which I remember Flora had to look after. It was a big round basket and quite heavy to carry. We brought this basket to the dining room because there was food available, but no china or cutlery. I recall that the food was not too good. We had to wash our dishes in very dirty water. Drinking water was very scarce and of course we were in the tropics and it was very hot. Most people suffered from diarrhoea, whilst children developed boils and other skin ailments.

Each day we eagerly listened to news about Singapore, and the day we heard that Singapore had fallen to the Japanese and an unconditional surrender had been signed, there was much crying and mourning from all the women.

We came within sight of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, and the ship anchored quite far away from the shore off Colombo. There was a huge swell all the time and the ship kept turning around in a circle. We went ashore in launches, as we hoped to get news of my Father. My only recollection of that day is that when we were waiting to return to the ship there were crowds of Australian soldiers on the pier. Some were drunk and shouting and we children were very frightened.

After a day or two, we left Colombo and sailed west and south. There was a more relaxed atmosphere as we were outside the range of Japanese bombers and submarines. We reached Mombasa, but this time we were not allowed off the ship and could only see the dark figures on the wharves. We sailed further south and Durban came in sight with beautiful beaches and thundering surf. We children hoped we would be allowed off the ship to go to the beaches. Military personnel came on board and began interviewing each family.

Mother told us that she had been advised to leave the ship and that she and the family would be housed in South Africa until further notice. Mother thought it would be good to leave the ship and live in South Africa, as there was no war there and we children were very nervous

whenever we heard any noise that sounded like bombs exploding or gun shots. She also thought that we would be nearer to Singapore and we might be able to get news of Father more easily.

On the dock by the ship there was a railway line and a train awaited us there. A group of people also stood on the dock playing musical instruments and a big tall lady sang “Land of Hope and Glory”. She sang for every ship that came in and I believe that in 1995 when Queen Elizabeth II visited South Africa there was a photo taken of the Queen standing beside a statue of this wonderful lady.

We travelled by train along the coast over a hundred miles to Port Shepstone and from there by bus to Margate. We and other families were housed in annexes of the Lucien Hotel. I will always remember when we went to the dining room for our first meal, as we were astonished to see glasses of milk and real food! We really looked forward to our meals. We went to the Government School, which began at 8.00 am and finished at 1.00 pm. We were then free to go to the beaches for surf-riding, to climb the rocks towards Port Shepstone or to trail after the men who were shark fishing. I joined the Girl Guides and we followed trails and learned the Morse Code.

My mother was anxious that we children should go to Catholic schools and she spoke to a guest who was staying at the Lucien Hotel, a Mr. Mitchell. At the time he was a Member of Parliament in Pietermaritzburg, Natal. He told my mother that the best schools in Natal were in Maritzburg and he offered to drive her there to see them. With her usual courageous spirit, my mother went with Mr. Mitchell, by what was a long drive at that time, from Margate to Maritzburg, through the valley of a thousand hills. She visited the Convent and School of the Sisters of the Holy Family and the Marist Brothers’ College for boys and she decided to move there.

We packed our belongings and left Margate and Port Shepstone to travel by train to Maritzburg, a long journey on a narrow gauge railway. The carriages were small and there was no corridor. We were brought

to a house outside Maritzburg city in a place called Townsend. We were to share half of the house with a family who were Afrikaans but also spoke English. Every weekday we walked a certain distance into town and then got a bus to our respective schools. At the weekends we played tennis with the two elder boys of the other family, who taught us how to use shotguns on the snakes when they came too near the house. Other times we visited a sugar cane plantation nearby and they showed us how to cut the cane and chew the sugar from it! After some months in this house, the other family showed signs of wanting to have the house to themselves, so my mother decided to move.

We went to a house on the other side of Maritzburg, in a place called Mountain Rise. It was a pleasant area and my mother became friendly with an Irish-born lady who lived nearby with her South African family. We children had to travel again by bus to the city and then walk to school. I remember walking ankle-deep through beautiful mauve petals from the jacaranda trees lining Loop Street, where the convent school was located. As it took us a long time to get to school, we were often late for classes, so my mother decided on another move. This time she placed us as boarders in our schools whilst she herself and my youngest sister, Anne, who was too young for school, went to live in a hotel in Maritzburg. This was much better for us all, especially for my mother, who met interesting people and joined a reading group which met to discuss the books they were reading. In 1979, when my sister Anne visited South Africa as an adult with her family, she called in at this hotel and the Indian waiter who used to attend them remembered Anne as a little girl!

A later move was to the bigger Imperial Hotel in Loop Street, which had rooms for us all during the holidays when we could not stay at school.

After the fall of Singapore to the Japanese, my father and his colleagues escaped in a not-too-seaworthy boat, which broke down in the Indian Ocean. They were finally rescued and brought to Colombo where they were housed in tents in the grounds of a hotel.

My father told us they were all suffering from dehydration as the only water they could get was when it rained and they caught the water in empty cigarette cans. They all had long beards!

It was only in late March 1942 that we learned that father had escaped from Singapore and was alive. My mother had written to my uncle, my father's brother who worked in the War Office in London, to tell him that she and the children were safe in Margate, South Africa. At first Uncle Charlie thought it was Margate in England! And when my father was able to communicate with my Uncle he found out where we were.

My father and five of his colleagues from the British Army financial administration were then sent to New Delhi, until such time as they were given new postings. Father was sent to Bagdad, Iraq, which was a British mandate at that time. We were able to write letters to him, and he to us in South Africa. After a year in Bagdad, my father was posted to Jerusalem, in Palestine, also a British mandate then. Again he was able to communicate with us and he sent us lovely prayer books and rosary beads from the Holy Land. In 1944, my father was moved again, this time back to Europe, where the War was still on, and this time to Northern Ireland! When my mother heard this she said "What are we doing here? Let's go back to Europe. We could go to the south of Ireland, which is neutral and not in a war zone." (We children were still always afraid when we heard sirens or the noise of planes.) So we left Maritzburg and boarded a ship for Europe. At this time the Suez Canal was open for shipping to pass through to the Mediterranean. So we sailed north in the Indian Ocean until we arrived at Port Taufiq, near Suez, where we were told that we all had to leave the ship as it was needed to transport Allied troops to southern Europe for the invasion.

We were all put in big military lorries, standing up like cattle, and brought through the desert on a tar macadam road built by the military. We stopped at what looked like a concentration camp as it was a big area with high barbed wire all around it and sentries at the gate. We could see rows of tents inside. This was known as a transition camp,

and called the “Aviary”, as it was only for women and children! We all lined up outside the Colonel’s tent and were given a number of a tent. Ours was number nine. My mother was then told that my older brother, Terry, would not be allowed to stay in this camp as he was 13 years of age. He with older boys was sent to the officer camp. We went to our tent and looked in. There was just a sand floor and three iron beds each side, each with a mattress and a blanket. The temperature was 102° F so we wondered about the blankets. We knew that night when the temperature plummeted! This was our first experience of desert life!

A lady called Helen joined us in our tent as she was travelling alone, so she made up the six people in the tent. Our bags were all dumped in a clearing in the middle of the camp so we went to collect them and that was all there was in the tent. The washhouses and latrines were all outside, as were the tents where we went for our meals. Italian prisoners of war were the cooks and they served us in the “dining room”, which was a long tent with wooden tables and benches. I can only remember that we got potatoes and carrots at the main meal every day. My mother said, “Carrots must grow in the desert!” We were always very thirsty and the water tasted like straw!

We could leave the camp if we told the sentry at the gate where we were going. We knew that somewhere along the tar macadam road there was a “chapel” and that there was Mass celebrated there on a Sunday. When we went outside we could thumb a lift in any army vehicle that passed by. The chapel was a tent with an altar table and benches and the priest was a wonderful Benedictine monk who had offered his services as an army chaplain during the war. At other times, Mass was at another camp further away but we got lifts there and I remember the wonderful singing of the African soldiers at the Mass. We were told we could go to the beaches at the Red Sea which we did. The beach was burning hot so we would run as quickly as possible into the water! There was an opportunity to go to Cairo and my mother very kindly allowed my sister Flora and me to go. Helen came with us and we were accompanied by one of the sentries at the camp.

We got a lift in a “breakdown” vehicle, which was the last one of a convoy of military vehicles going to Cairo. Our vehicle always travelled last, so that if any others of the convoy broke down or had any trouble, this one could help. Flora and I sat in front beside the driver, who was from Texas and had the slow Texas drawl. We stopped at a half-way house to get a drink and we were given a big mug of very hot tea! This quenched our thirst and helped us on a very hot journey. The driver left us in Cairo and arranged where he would pick us up in the evening. The sentry who was with us had been to Cairo before, so he knew where to bring us. We went to see the Pyramids and the Sphinx, which were enormous in our eyes and the many camels with loads on their backs. We were frightened of their fierce bark, so did not want a ride on them. We passed the famous Shepheard’s Hotel and had a meal in a restaurant. I remember I ate Russian Salad for the first time! Late in the evening we went to an area outside Cairo city called Heliopolis, where the Texan driver picked us up. Much later I learned that Heliopolis was the place where Jesus, Mary and Joseph stayed when they had to leave Bethlehem and go to Egypt. We slept all the way back to our camp, this time in the back of the vehicle, through a very dark night, and arrived safely.

Every day my brother Terry would come to see us, as my mother had told him. He usually came in the afternoon and stayed until we went for the evening meal and then he returned to his camp for their meal, which was later. One evening, my mother and other mothers were called to the Colonel’s tent and were told that there had been an accident in the boys’ camp and to go to the hospital. I went with my mother to the area of tents which was the hospital and we were brought to a long tent like a ward. There were beds each side, some had screens around them, and we found Terry lying in bed with his eyes closed. His face was black. At first we thought he was dead but he opened his eyes and recognised us.

Only later, we heard what had happened. When Terry got back, the other boys were already in their tent. They told him they had been

out exploring in the surrounding desert where the military had been practicing and had found some of the ammunition used by them. They had brought some back with them as souvenirs. They were duds and the sentry at the gate let them pass with them. One of the boys offered Terry a trench mortar bomb as a souvenir, but he said that he did not want it. The boy said: "It's only a dud," and threw it in the air: it fell to the ground and exploded. The tent blew out and Terry was thrown out with the blast, with the shrapnel of the bomb embedded all over his body. The same happened with the other boys and one boy died.

At this time we were wondering how much longer we would be in the camp. We were all getting sick because of the food and the water and got "gippy tummy" as they called it, in other words diarrhoea. It affected my younger sister Anne, especially; she didn't want to eat and became very white and thin.

The day came when we were told we would be leaving the camp and that a ship was ready. We were brought to Suez in military vehicles, mostly jeeps, and I remember my mother insisting that Terry be carried by the soldiers on to the jeep with us. However it was not to the ship that we went, but to the railway station, as we were to travel by train to Port Said at the northern end of the Suez Canal. The carriages were small and very hot. Our luggage was put on top of the train and most of it was ransacked by the thieves who got up on top as soon as the train started!

We arrived at Port Said and saw a big grey ship, enormous in our eyes, and again mother had to insist that Terry be carried on board. She was not sure that he could travel with us, as we had heard that the sick could only travel in Red Cross ships. When we did get aboard, our papers were examined, especially Terry's reports from the hospital. It took a long time before they decided that Terry could stay on the ship, but he was sent to the "sick bay", which was somewhere near the hold. He was there for the rest of the voyage and I don't think he was ever brought up on deck.

We sailed through the Mediterranean with a barrage balloon attached to the ship and well above it. This, they said, was to ward off air attacks. We passed Mount Etna which was not “smoking”, through the Straits of Gibraltar and into the Atlantic Ocean. We watched the clocks to see when the ship would turn east and north but it kept going west towards North America. We had heard that many women and children from England had been evacuated there, so perhaps that was where we were going. But the day came when the clocks were put back an hour so we knew we were heading east and northeast. Later we understood that the ship was avoiding the sea mines which had been set all along the western coast of Europe by the Allies to prevent an invasion of Europe from that side.

Of course we were never told at which port we would arrive. As we came towards northern Europe, we realised we were sailing by the west coast of Ireland! And when we got further, we could see the coast of Donegal and a train passing by. My mother said it would be wonderful if we could jump off here and get to Ireland but we sailed on past Northern Ireland and south to Glasgow, where the ship docked and we all disembarked. A cousin of my mother lived in Glasgow. She was married to a medical doctor and had five children. Mother was able to contact the family and Uncle John came at once to the ship and brought us to their home in Motherwell, a suburb of Glasgow.

I don't know how Auntie Kay and Uncle John coped with six extra people in their house, as well as their own family of seven and their grandfather. We knew nothing about food rationing, so how they fed us for the week we were there we don't know! Mother was able to contact my father to tell him where we were and to make arrangements to travel to Belfast. After a week in Glasgow, we travelled by boat from Stranraer to Larne, by night. There were no berths available and we had to sit on chairs all night. We arrived in Larne early morning and went to the train station to get the train to Belfast. Whilst we were waiting, the siren sounded for an air raid! Mother looked around for shelter, but no one seemed to be moving, so she asked a passer-by who

said: “As today is Saturday, the sirens always sound at 9.00 am as a practice”. What a relief for us!

When we arrived at the station in Belfast, other went to the gates to see father and to tell him about Terry, as he would not have known anything about us since we left South Africa about four or five weeks before. I stayed in the carriage with Terry, as he could not walk and we had no wheel chair. As it was war time there were no porters to help with luggage, but eventually a very old porter came with a baggage trolley and put Terry on it to bring him out of the station.

There was no accommodation available for us in Belfast, as most of the big houses had been requisitioned by the British and U.S. military, so father had rented a house in Donaghadee, a seaside resort on the coast in Co. Down. We had to leave that house at the end of May as it was always rented to summer holiday makers, so we moved to a boarding house, until we eventually rented a house on the outskirts of Donaghadee, which was more satisfactory. This was in June/July 1944 and there was no talk about school for us, as it was school holiday time.

Come September, Terry, Denis and I went to boarding school in the Republic of Ireland. Terry and Denis went to Terenure College in Dublin and I went to the Dominican School in Wicklow. This was like entering another world and I was an “alien”. I spoke with a South African accent, my hair was bleached from the sun and the girls in my class knew very little about the war raging in Europe or about the parts of Asia and Africa from where I had come. The Sisters were more understanding and they were my teachers. My three years at school in Wicklow gave me a real wish to enter the religious life and become a Dominican Sister, but my family was returning to Singapore, I had no family in Ireland and I still felt a stranger in an unknown land. However the Dominicans were willing to receive me and my parents reluctantly allowed me to go my own way (I had just turned 18 years of age.) It was the first and only time I saw my father cry - when he said goodbye.

POSTSCRIPT

In addition to my religious training in Wicklow, I also studied in Dublin for a degree and diploma in education, after which I returned to Wicklow and to work in education. This was in the late 1950s. A few years later, the Dominican Sisters were looking for volunteers to work in several other countries. As a result, in 1962 I was sent to Portugal and I lived and worked there for over 50 years. So many changes took place in those years in terms of the country and our Dominican life and I can truly say that Portugal became my home in every way.

In 2010, our community in the Convento de Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso in Belém, Lisbon had become reduced in numbers: three Sisters had died from illness and advanced age, and three were sent to Ireland for further medical treatment. We were told that there were no Dominican Sisters in Ireland or elsewhere available to be sent to our community in Lisbon and there was the possibility that the Convent would have to be closed.

This was shattering news for us. We were inclined not to believe it or even think about it. To close a Convent with a wonderful history of 377 years and with a flourishing mission to over a thousand people, young and old, seemed incredible to us who were living it all. The community were now five Sisters, four of whom had lived in Portugal for 73, 55, 40 and 30 years respectively and we thought we would end our days in Portugal. However we were gradually convinced that we would have to leave our convent and our very big Portuguese family and go to one or other of the Dominican communities in Ireland.

In the final weeks it all happened very quickly and at the end of August 2016 the four Sisters still living in Bom Sucesso left the Convent and Lisbon on a flight to Dublin. Many members of our Congregation were there to “welcome” us, but we greeted them in tears! The airport attendants said they had seen people *leaving* the airport in tears but never on arrival!

Although the move and the settling in was so painful and upsetting for us, we were chastened by thoughts of the thousands of people at this same time who were being forced out of their homes and countries with nothing of their personal possessions and with no welcome to another country or place. Even with our hearts heavy, we thanked God for His goodness to us and prayed, and continue to pray, for all the refugees and migrants of our world and that God will change the hearts and minds of those who wage war and violence.

Dublin, April 2017.

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Brought up in the Far East, Sister Aileen returned to Ireland in 1944, where she later entered the Order of the Dominican Sisters in the 1950s. She was sent as a volunteer by the Order to the 300 year old Dominican Community at Bom Sucesso in Belém, where she lived and worked as a teacher for over 50 years.

NOTE: Although the Irish Dominican Sisters are no longer living at the Convento de Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso in Belém, Lisbon, their legacy remains strong in the fine school known as the “Colégio do Bom Sucesso” at Belém”, and in the nearby “Centro da Sagrada Família” in Algés, known to generations of British residents as “Sister Agnes’s Crèche”.