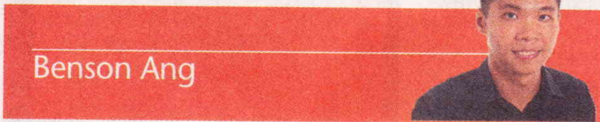
JUNGLE NIGHTMARE

- Eating snails and pets to survive
- Poor sanitation
- Threatened by wild animals
- Malaria and malnutrition



Benson Ang

Lured by the promise of a better life, a group of about 3,000 residents here moved to an obscure part of the Malayan jungle during the Japanese Occupation.

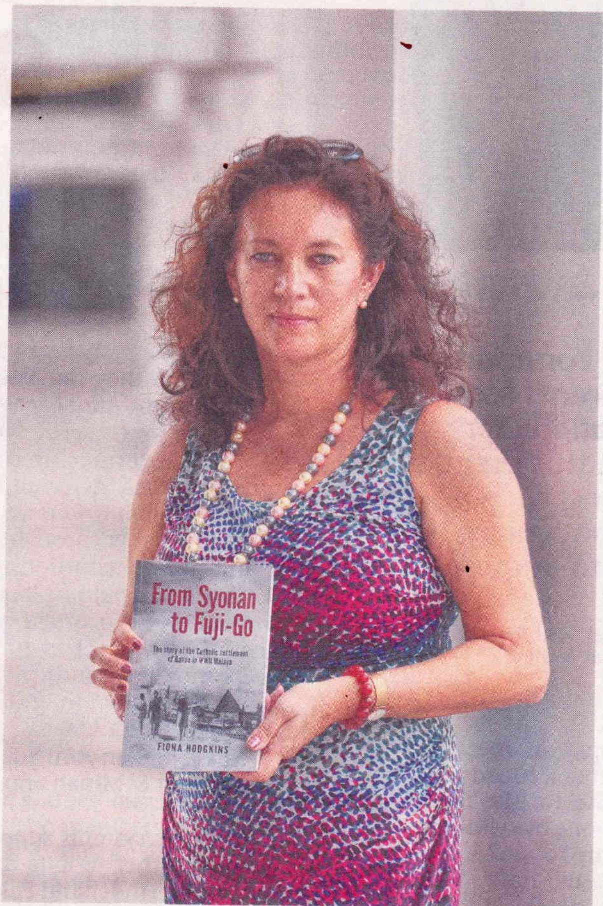
To alleviate the food shortage in Singapore, the Japanese military administration had touted the settlement in the state of Negeri Sembilan as a beautiful, idyllic rural setting where people could grow crops and rear animals.

But a rude shock was in store. What greeted them instead was a malaria-infested swathe with soil that could not sustain farming.

After the crops failed, some resorted to eating snails, snakes and even their pets to survive.

Sanitation was also poor, and some succumbed to malaria and malnutrition. During their two years there, from 1943 to 1945, an estimated 500 settlers – or one in six – died.

This little known wartime episode of hardship and suffering is the subject of a new 269-page book, titled From Syonan To Fuji-Go, which will be launched on



"Some were unwilling to talk to me as they did not want to relive their painful memories."

MRS FIONA HODGKINS (above), who wrote the book From Syonan To Fuji-Go

Wednesday. Syonan is short for Syonan-to, Singapore's name during the Japanese Occupation, while Fuji-Go is the settlement's Japanese name, meaning "beautiful village".

It is also known as the Bahau Catholic Colony, after a nearby town in Negeri Sembilan, and took up about 100 sq km, or about one-seventh the size of Singapore today.

People were persuaded to leave for the settlement, which was painted in newspapers then as a safe haven from the war.

Once there, however, the settlers, who were mostly

Eurasian and Chinese Catholics, had to struggle for survival.

Besides having to build their own homes, roads and bridges, they also faced a severe lack of medical facilities.

At one point, supplies such as antiseptic solutions, cotton wool and bandages ran out, and the settlers had to use sheets and clothing, which were not sterile, as bandages. These soon led to infections.

After the Japanese surrendered in 1945, the settlement was abandoned. Today, it is a palm oil and rubber plantation with no evidence of its wartime inhabitants.

The new book documents why people left for Bahau, what life was like there and how they were affected by their time there.

It is written by British national Fiona Hodgkins, 48, a tutor and educational consultant whose Eurasian mother lived in the settlement as a child. Her Caucasian father is British. About 60 per cent of the settlement's residents were known to be Eurasians.

Mrs Hodgkins, a Singapore permanent resident who has lived here for 14 years, started work on the book in 2008 in a bid to learn more about her Asian ancestry to share with her three children, aged 21, 18 and 15.

In the course of her research, she soon felt there was a broader story to be told about the settlement.

She says: "This is an important, largely unknown story in Singapore's social history. I felt I had to write it now as many of the settlers have died or are very old." Her mother died in 2004.

To put the book together, she pored over newspaper articles, private journals, memoirs and oral histories of the inhabitants.

One of her sources was the 2004 memoir Flavours Of Change, written by Mr Joe Conceicao, a former Singapore Member of Parliament and ambassador to Canberra and Moscow, who had lived in Bahau when he was about 20 years old.

In his book, Mr Conceicao, who is now 90, recounted his encounters with those who were sick and dying in Bahau.

He wrote: "We hadn't a chance... Hundreds died... in some instances malaria hit the brain, in which case the unfortunate expired, raving."

ST GRAPHICS

He added: "In the Bahau hospital, the burial detail appeared to be busier than the nurse or doctor, who tended to the few living who remained."

Mrs Hodgkins also interviewed 60 people connected to the settlement, some of whom have since died.

For example, Mrs Thesie Angus, then 18, lived in the colony with her newborn daughter Maureen.

They lived in a house made mostly of attap which doubled as a cafe serving Malay cakes.

The sense of isolation was what affected Mrs Angus the most.

Although she knew of social activities such as dances and get-togethers in the colony, she could not attend any. She was quoted in Mrs Hodgkins' book as saying: "I was just a housewife with a young baby, how could I go out?"

When Mrs Hodgkins interviewed them in Singapore four years ago, Mrs Angus was 85 and her daughter was 67.

They gave her some old photos of their time in Bahau, but said they had got rid of many others because they did not want the memories.

Both died about a year ago. The cause of their deaths is not known.

Many other residents, Mrs Hodgkins noted, are in their 80s or 90s and could no longer remember much of what happened.

Ms Sim Wan Hui, 47, a deputy director at National Heritage Board, which provided a grant to the book, says: "The book provides an insight into a lesser known part of Singapore's history from the perspective of settlers."

SundayLife! managed to interview two former residents, now in their 70s, who were about five years old when they lived in Bahau.

Many of the settlers later emigrated to countries such as Australia and Britain for work or studies. Some also wanted to get away from the traumatic memories that plagued them.

The stint in Bahau had clearly left some of them with emotional scars.

"In fact, some were unwilling to talk to me as they did not want to relive their painful memories," says Mrs Hodgkins.

One former resident, Mr John Chua, now in his 70s, was willing to communicate with her only in writing.

He was quoted in the book as saying: "The stay in Bahau was a very terrifying period for all of us... We were very frightened of the wild animals.

"In the daytime, we saw wild elephants, wild boars roaming in the jungles and monkeys on the trees.

"There were wild animals growling in the night as well as the hissing of snakes and other insect noises."

bang@sph.com.sg

Settlers trying to grow crops in the Bahau settlement (left) during the Japanese Occupation. They soon found that the soil was so bad, it could not sustain farming.

PHOTOS: CAROLINE CHIA, EURASIAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE, COURTESY OF FIONA HODGKINS & THE DE SOUZA FAMILY

A photo of Ms Maureen Angus as a baby and her mother Thesie in the Bahau settlement (far left) and a 2010 photo of them (left).

Plagued by skin boils and dysentery

Mr Michael Alves and Mrs Fiona Hodgkins (both above) holding the flag that was lowered in the Bahau settlement as everyone was being repatriated. The flag was given to Mr Alves by a British officer in 1945. Mr Alves (right) with his cousin in 1948, shortly after the war.

Sickness plagued Mr Michael Alves during his time at the Bahau colony.

Only about four then, he recalls having malaria at least two or three times a year.

"I'd have a high fever, sweat a lot and feel weak and lethargic."

To reduce the fever, he was made to drink liquid quinine, an anti-malarial medicine with a bitter taste.

Now 75 and a grandfather of seven, he says he also suffered from dysentery – diarrhoea which contains blood – due to the unhygienic conditions.

In addition, he had a carbuncle, an abscess made up of several skin boils that took up a large portion of his lower right leg.

This, he says, was caused by poor nutrition.

"Back then, we didn't get to eat fish, meat or green vegetables," he says in a telephone interview from Batemans Bay, a town in New South Wales in Australia where he now lives.

"In those days, food was very limited. All we ate was tapioca, tapioca and tapioca. Sometimes, I'd eat quails, which I trapped in snares, just to eat something different. Quail tastes like chicken."

Thankfully, his aunt was a qualified nurse who lanced and treated his boils daily with salt water.

"She was my guardian angel. She had very little access to medication, but she did the best she could," Mr Alves says.

"I can only imagine how tough it must have been for her because I can assure you I wasn't a good patient."

His aunt died in 2008.

He says he still suffers from poor health due to the malnutrition during his years in Bahau.

Nonetheless, he considers himself lucky. "I saw people catching wild fish in the streams for food. I also heard about how others were so hungry that they ate snails, snakes and even rats.

"Compared to them, I guess it was fine to eat tapioca all the time."

When it was time to leave, "we were delighted", he says.

Mr Alves moved to Perth in 1957 to further his studies and later served in the Royal Australian Air Force for 20 years.

He recalls that when the settlers of Bahau were repatriated in 1945, the Union Jack flag that had been raised in Bahau at the time of liberation was lowered and given to him.

At the book launch on Wednesday, he will present this flag to the Eurasian Association of Singapore and the National Museum of Singapore

He says: "Everyone in Bahau came from Singapore. It's only right that the flag belongs to the Singapore people."

C M Y K

Starving family ate pet goat

Ms Claire de Souza (above) recalls cleaning her teeth with her fingers as there was no toothbrush. She (front row, third from left) and her family in 1946, after moving out of the Bahau settlement.

Former school teacher Claire de Souza was once so hungry, she had to eat her pet goat during the two years she lived in the Bahau settlement.

The 76-year-old is the aunt of Mrs Fiona Hodgkins, the author of the book From Syonan To Fuji-Go that looks at life of the settlers.

She was about five when her family moved to Malaya.

She recalls: "We tried to grow crops initially, but soon learnt that the ground was very bad. There just wasn't sufficient food."

One day, her family sent her to visit her grandparents who lived outside the colony.

"When I returned in the evening, I couldn't find my pet goat Nancy," the mother of two recounts over the telephone from the Gold Coast in Australia.

"Then I noticed something different being served on the dinner table and realised Nancy had been slaughtered. I cried and cried. But I was also very hungry and, in the end, my family persuaded me to eat the meat.

"My parents explained they did it for the family's survival."

She lived with her parents, three sisters and an uncle in a hut with an attap roof and walls made from tree trunks.

For meals, they usually ate tapioca, sweet potatoes, chillies and brinjals, which they grew on their plot. Apart from goats, they also reared chickens and pigs.

"In those days, we ate so much tapioca. After the war, my father didn't even want to look at tapioca because it brought back so many bad memories."

Her family had a well which they dug themselves, but water drawn from it had to be boiled before it could be consumed. There was no soap for bathing, she recalls. "You basically had a face towel and did the best you could.

Toothbrushes were very scarce too.

"I don't remember having one," she says. "But my mother would make us all clean our teeth by rubbing it with our fingers to get the dirt off. She was very strict with hygiene."

Ms de Souza moved to Australia in 1971 and is now an Australian citizen. She is married to an Australian, aged 82, who was an agricultural economist.

She says of her time in Bahau: "There were always stories about people dying from malaria and malnourishment. As a child, I didn't really know the dangers of the war.

"But whenever my parents spoke in low tones, I knew there was something amiss."