

Southern Adventist University
KnowledgeExchange@Southern

World War II

Oral History

Fall 12-8-2016

Missionary Life in Singapore

Stacy P. Higgins

Southern Adventist University, hstacy@southern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/oralhist_ww2



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Higgins, Stacy P, "Missionary Life in Singapore" (2016). *World War II*. 20.
https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/oralhist_ww2/20

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in World War II by an authorized administrator of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact jspears@southern.edu.

Students Interviewer's Name: Stacy Higgins

Interviewee name: John Keyes

Time and location of the interview: McKee Library at 11:00pm

The interview was conducted two sessions the first one was Tuesday October 25 2016, and the second one was conducted Tuesday November 1, 2016 both interviews lasted around two hours, each interview was one hour. It was conducted at Southern Adventist University Library in Collegedale, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About John Keyes:

John Keyes was born January 7, 1932. He currently works as a teacher at Southern Adventist University for the department of Journalism and Communication, he works here as a speech professor. Him and his wife went as missionaries to teach at a school in Singapore. He ended up living there for a total of fourteen years. This interview was based off him living as a missionary in Singapore while they were becoming independent. Many other topics were mentioned as in the Japanese after the war in Singapore.

Interviewer: Stacy Higgins (SH)

Interviewee: John Keyes (JK)

SH: Whenever you went to Singapore what were the major events that were happening there that you had too... I remember you saying you had to move the school?

JK: Now we didn't move, we were prepared to Indonesia was threatening to invade it was because of politics, Sukarno I think was his name president of Indonesia (Laughter) so wanting to expand that's my understanding, was because the Chinese wanting to come in? I don't think so, Singapore is mostly Chinese but it was Malaya than but Malaysia which includes Borneo and part of Borneo Saba Sarawak like the Indonesians there, Malay people so I think they wanted one big nation.

SH: Were there any major events that you encountered there?

JK: Shortly after we got their Singapore became a state, I think there were thirteen states, state of Malaysia. And that didn't work because, Chinese and their culture were different from the Malay , Chinese very ambitious for becoming wealthy prosperous , and worked late at night at shops and very wonderful people, but Malaysians were also wonderful people , but their ideals are more family oriented when we were there the Malays in Singapore lived in Grass roofs fetched, dirt floors , it wasn't bad I thought it was beautiful where they had their gardens and whatever, but they weren't that interested in Marvelous homes . However Malaysia the thing that really upset the Chinese was the Buddhist background they wanted a

nice house to live in , it became very expensive to live in style , it was a million dollars , very expensive, and the Malays most, they say if you were born a Malay you were born a Muslim and that created friction in Singapore when a Malay government official said I am not a Muslim, and the Muslim community said you are a Muslim you are a Malay, you were born a Muslim and so in Malaysia they were collecting a lot of money in Singapore , and it was going to building in guess what ? Not houses, they were building high rises, in Malaysia they were building gorgeous musk's, because the people felt they could identify with the musk, and people felt very comfortable.

SH: Were they having any religion issue beliefs?

JK: Lee Kuan Yew was a very powerful president and he made sure that there was no criticism or friction, maybe I'm confused but last time, Muslims had a newspaper in Singapore, I didn't read the article, it was in Malay, I didn't read very well, learned some Malay but...they were criticizing the Christians, and saying the Catholics are winning the young Muslim men by having the beautiful young women and invite them to church. And Lee Kuan Yew called all the religious leaders in Singapore, including the of our division president, because our office was in Singapore and he came back and said Oh! I'm glad I was not the target of the prime ministers lecture he told , he was lecturing the editor of the newspaper and said that would never happen again, he knew there was tension in the groups , they were four main groups, mostly Chinese, Secondary Malays than Pakistani Indians , people made lots of dictations between Pakistani and Indians , because we had little Indian and Pakistanis were there to because they were part of India at one time, but they divided over religious lines, like Hindus , Muslims, but they were all part of India at one time.

SH: Did they have any problem with Adventists?

JK: Adventist were looked up to, we had some members who were part of the government and the professional people were friends with the prime minister , well one family and the church we attended she was a medical doctor , she attended Loma Linda , her father was a law partner with Mrs. Lee Kuan new father, so they were family friends, and they lived right across the street from the governors palace where nobody could go in it but you could see it from far away, but Adventist had good reputation there.

SH: Were there Adventist there at the schools?

JK: Well the first school when I first went out there to teach was dependence of missionaries mostly American some Australians, which came from everywhere in the far east, Marcus Sheffield who teaches English was one of those students he came from Africa with his father was chief surgeon at some. I think he was medical director of the division, so it was missionaries students but when I went came back it was for 99.9 percent nationals Chinese Indian and Indonesians they came from

every place they could because Singapore was , WOAH !because it was so far ahead of education , the British did a super job of building up medicine education business and they passed this along to the nationals when they left behind people well trained with western world ideas and so which was not true , where the French were terrible , the Dutch were terrible the German were despised ,German culture and German culture clashed like ,I remember my pastor who's was a local person who was telling me about a German surgeon and he would be impatient the way you know some surgeons are and call people name , and which is a horrible thing to do in that culture you must not let anyone lose face , Paul Elbridge was president in Japan at the war and before the war , there was a woman that just was not fitting in , she just wasn't soothed for what they had her do, if you did not do the American way you just had to fire her, no so he spoke Japanese and he went to her brother and explained the situation and not a word to her , and the brother said thank you for doing the Japanese way don't let her lose face he said let us take care of it the next day she came in to work and announced everybody "I'm sorry but I really can't work here , because my brother needs me to help look after his children , she didn't lose face at the people, where Germans we were traveling (Laughter) with an Andrews group and one of the girls put her feet on the wooden bench across from her and the German said OHH dirty feet on the seat well an Asian a proper Asian would never do anything like that because saving faces was one of the most important thing , and you must not embarrass them, find another soft way , with the German my mother says you never must take of what a German says , of what he means.

SH: I know that there was war again the Japs and Singapore and the time you went there how did people react to the Japanese?

JK: Yes the Japanese were hated, they could spot a Japanese a mile away, you can too after you live there, Koreans behave differently than Japanese and Japanese behave differently than Chinese, and American Asian were different than the local but you may look like them because of your genetic background but your behavior is different you walk differently you move differently, it's an interesting , we had missionaries from Pakistan and one of them , said to me you walk funny , no I don't walk like a Pakistani it was fun watching his family walk, (He stood up and said I have knee problems , and was walking and demonstrating me how he walked and how the Pakistanis walked). And why you do that is because your father walked that way, you imitate each other, so I didn't tell him but you walk funny too, but so yes there was hatred and it was years until the Japanese came in to Singapore for business even though there were no gun around in Singapore some of those Japanese just disappeared, just disappeared (Laughter) Nobody knew where they went and you don't have a gun to do it (Laughter) But quietness of the.... Was there any crime? I never saw any crime , but a lawyer that would help us with some business and that was from a very prominent family , I said something " so wonderful so little crime" and he said you know I was surprised, the other day I went to a restaurant and sat down and ordered my food and some other people came sat down ordered the food, and I think he was alone and observing and he said I noticed a

group of men that walked out without paying and they were part of like a Singapore Mafia they say okay we will protect this block but you will feed us , and he said he didn't know that , and he lived there all his life and he didn't know that , he observed and he found out about it , so whenever you go as foreigner , there is so much that you don't read , and you need to get acquainted with the nationals that can help you. I don't know if I told you but last time they asked me to preach a sermon on the appreciation you know of people , an oriental kind of thing (Coughs) and I thought oh Okay I'm going to illustrate it so I go to a funeral and I ask if I can borrow a casket (Laughter) (Coughs) and uh I was going to put it right up front of the church , put roses and put on the casket and ask people to come up at the end of the service and pick up a rose to go and give it to somebody and say thank you, some people were alarmed (Coughs) and I would do that and maybe you would offend somebody so I went to an older white grayed hair man which was unusual than because Asians would not let their hair grow white , they would have black hair all their lives, (Coughs) they changed , he allowed his hair to grow and he was respected , so I went to him and asked him ., some people are worried that people were going to get offended they themselves wouldn't , so I ask them after his long years of working their ? he said no their shouldn't be any problem, so as an American being so and brash I went ahead and did it , there was no problem , but it's good to consult because Uh! , and I maybe If I told you this before again I didn't want to be offensive as a teacher (Coughs) because I knew that I invited you to a lunch and you came , your obligated to invite me , and I didn't like that but we tried and we found out that it was true, teachers could not afford to entertain the way they thought Americans would want to be entertained well the problem is knowing is that if you receive a gift you have to give one . I had a student he graduated from here, but I just could not let him progress as in ESL student because he just wasn't progressing and (Coughs) after class near the end of the quarter the student came up and gave me present and I still have it in my file it's uh a miniature trishaw it's the one that people ride and have three wheels , it's a taxi , I was delighted with it girl said I will change his name SUMADY pass this class, I knew I was trapped (Laughter) so I went to over the boys dean that was Chinese that knew the culture and I said john what do I do ? he said just don't do anything their getting an American degree and they have to live with American standards, don't do anything. So, I still have it he didn't graduate there, he went to New Bold, and took courses and came here and finished. I guess he learned enough English, that he was able to go to New Bold. I was a tough teacher because we had standards we had to meet (Coughs), so I just said nothing and thank you, I didn't reciprocate, it's a brag.

SH: I remember you telling me the crime rate in Singapore was low?

JK: I don't know what the statistics but I never heard of any. QUESTION you said that in Singapore people would chop peoples arm if they did any crime? The Japanese did that during occupation, and you know the Japanese were you know horrible (Coughs).

SH: they wouldn't do that in Singapore?

JK: It was done in Singapore they concurred there that whole are the Japanese, and why do they the Singaporeans for a long-time love Americans? Because we drove the Japanese out, and so they loved us.

SH: It's interesting how the Japanese respected the Americans while you were in Japan but they didn't respect the Singaporeans?

JK: Well because they submitted (Coughs) they gave no trouble and we poured millions of dollars in structure in Japan , we felt guilty of course for dropping two Atomic bombs , but what else can we do I know we , I go to Sabbath school here and one of my good friends , uh well he worked at Oakridge and was part of the program of building our atomic strength , we go to Sabbath school we get to together two or three times a week , but there is a member in the Sabbath school class who also is a scientist and, they were caught in the Philippines from the Japanese , when they were concurred their but he loves the Japanese as the Japanese friends so upset that the Americans dropped the Atomic bombs and I said to h I'm one day john have you ever met Ed, he won't speak to him he feels so , anybody Oakridge whoa! He's a brilliant man he's eighty-eight years old, but his mind is still terrific, (coughs) they had mixed feelings. But when I was teaching at the college , I met a Chinese teacher , who my wife and I started sponsoring the youth when I was their ten years earlier with uh working with the local youth and he was one of them and when he came back he was anti American, I don't know what , but I do know that one of the Americans who is not tactful uh this teacher wife was secretary of this officer, uh union division and maybe she wasn't as oriental as most because they spoke span , and they were taking showers three times a day, and you needed to in Singapore I did to , because of all the humidity , you couldn't live with yourselves but he was not tactful most people like Germans would tell him what he thought like now , which is not good, and he told the main secretary to the presidents secretary that you talk to my secretary and tell her you need to take baths before she comes to work. Ah oh no! you don't do that so I'm sure he was resentful of that, but I wasn't go right with that, I can do some speculating in this area, but I must in speculate you what I know because there was friction.

SH: I know in Singapore they were really clean, was there a reason why they were so clean?

JK: They are very clean in their homes umm. Some of the young people that we knew, we would go to their homes there were dirt floors I mean you could be clean and have dirt floors, if you don't have money for anything else, you know you didn't have... you certainly didn't need heat in Singapore. When we first went out there was no air conditioning in our car which nearly killed us, when we came back we had an air condition installed in the car (Laughter) it was terrible so yeah we needed to shower three times a day especially because when I first went out I taught in the morning and I was ground supervisor in the afternoon and I loved working outside in the grounds.

SH: What did you do?

JK: Mow trimmed, but the missionary kids were no good at all as workers, they didn't know how to work because all the missionaries had servants because they were expected to work you know all around, so they had to have servants and parents would leave home and say okay make sure you clean your room before lunch time or whatever, so soon the parents went out of the house the servants would come and clean the room

SH: Why would missionaries have servants?

JK: Because they were so busy, and they were expected to hire people to help them because there were people who needed work.

SH: What were the missionaries doing as in the type of work?

JK: Well their office... it was like teaching office work administration they were all doctors. Educators, supervisors, they were very busy because we had to have Americans to be the treasures. Why? because money would be used for things that weren't supposed to be used for. You weren't here when Dr. Sarli was president , he was in charge of the language school in Bangkok Thailand , he had these westerns principles... you do not , give or receive bribes , you do not pay for government privileges and so uh, he called a meeting and he was the only foreigner , and that had to have governments permits in order to operate the school so he said we got to get the permit , and were not going to put money under the table, so next morning he met the treasure and said how did it go with the government did you get the permit , yes ,well how did you manage it, he was curious you know ? well I almost said

SH: under the table (laughter).

JK: Or they would get the envelope, drop it on the floor, opp! I think you dropped something.

SH: (laughter)

JK: And so you know, I didn't hand you anything, it fell on the floor (LAUGHTER), and so all that gave was Americans fits of course and Americans actually ran the far east, with training (Coughs) , it was difficult to get local workers because you know there is no prestige in church, these bright people were going to government service becoming Doctors Lawyers and whatever and in Singapore to get in the national university you had to be good ,because I asked , and I went to the national university to talk to an English teacher , where did you get your degree, and she said at the university of London, and I said why sis you get it

there , why didn't you get it here ? he said I tried getting it here , but it was too hard so I had to go to London in order to get it (Laughter)

SH: They sent him back to London?

JK: And so, he went to London. Which is cheaper to go to British schools, and of course they were part of the communal, so quite a challenge.

SH: So, what about Malaya, I know Malaya became separate, they weren't part of Singapore anymore, was there any conflict in between them that you saw?

JK: Oh! yeah, there was riots over it, because Malays came down from Malaysia to police Singapore and Chinese weren't about to have them policing there were riots, burning of the They would put thick rags on the end of arrows and fuel and shoot it in the thatcher, it was very bad so the prime minister of Malaysia met with primes minister of Singapore and that Singapore must withdraw from the federation.

SH: what was the reason, was it because of territory or racial?

JK: It was racial, oh there is a lot of racial tension in the far east more than here, ours is so open, it's settle and senility is part of the culture, Japanese, I think about when I left. Then I did tell you about the Chinese Chop... stamp .. in order to. When I was leaving the college they had to go our way, and there was a little gift with a not in it, and it was... what the Chinese call the chop lets ,to stamp on something , to signify your name or whatever , and I loved it, I thought that was wonderful, but they were laughing, because they gave me... it was my name and it was you know awesome or something like but I knew that some oriental twitch behind it so I went to a man who knew Chinese and English super well he was on the press we had a printing press over there and I said Mrs. Wool talk to me about what this say , he said well you know marvelous wonderful, but it has other meanings strange, peculiar, (Laughter).

SH: What did awesome mean?

JK: It depends on how you say it, and so they were technically very settle about that. What do you think? Ah! there just awesome! (Laughter) we can hear it.

SH: it was like a code?

JK: Oh, yes! It was like the American roast. You know about the roast? And the Australians love that and the Americans.... the Australians would do it right in the poppet when introducing... this stupid oh bloke and they would say that (LAUGHTER) where Americans would be like what are you doing. if you go to Australia don't be offended they do that... he's a real idiot ... there was two men in Australia that would do that regularly to each other (LAUGHTER). It makes the American very uncomfortable and the Australians do not like that thing where they

say he's such a good fellow, oh they hate that (Laughter). So it's culture its part of culture.

SH: When you were in Singapore you were with your wife correct?

JK: Yeah we came back and from ten years ago, then we went out back and it was a total of fourteen years.it was 1963 to 1972 for the first ten years, and then back there for five years.

SH: The overall experience was marvelous?

JK: It was marvelous we loved when we went back we met some of the people we gone to church with, and that have been in my class, the reason we came back was because our older daughter was ready for college, and she was used to Singapore, that was home sending her to a foreign culture here, her English was excellent, she was a great student, and now we would go home, and now that Dr. Sarli became president here at Southern, he put our name in. My former principle wanted me to come in join, and they called him, because I worked there for recommendation said you better hire him because if you don't I will, and so I was hired, and my daughter is a very good student, she's not brilliant, but very diligent she took English from me and did very well, both daughter took English.

¹ A bibliography is attached for further reading.

Bibliography

- Chan Heng Chee, *A Sensation of Independence*
(Singapore: Times Books International, 2001) 185.
- Cathie Draine and Barbara Hall, *Culture Shock*
(Portland Organ: Graphic Arts Center, 1886) 221.
- Florence Lamoureux, *Indonesia A Global Studies Handbook*
(Santa Barbara, California, 2003) 141.
- Exbb Ita, "Singapore's Separation from Malaysia"
N/A, June 18, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN9AZ44i6qs>
- Akashi Yoji, *An annotated Bibliographical Study of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya/ Singapore*, 141-145 (NUS Press 2008) /books.google.com/books.
- Kästle, Klaus. "History of Singapore." *History of Singapore*.
November 03, 2016. nationsonline.org/oneWorld/History/Singapore-history.htm.
- J, M. "How Singapore Gained Its Independence."
The Economist. March 22, 2015. Accessed November 03, 2016.
<http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/03/economist-explains-22>.
- Commentaries. "Why Are Singaporean Streets So Clean?" - Quora. March 5, 2014. Accessed November 03, 2016. <https://www.quora.com/Why-are-Singaporean-streets-so-clean>.
- David Hogan Honorary Professor, The University of Queensland.
"Why Is Singapore's School System So Successful, and Is It a Model for the West?" *The Conversation*. February 11, 2014. <http://theconversation.com>.
- "Discrimination in Singapore." *Community for Expatriates & Global Minds*. 2005.
<https://www.internations.org/singapore-expats/guide/16087-safety-security/discrimination-in-singapore-16090>.

