

Langdon Gilkey

Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women Under Pressure

Langdon Gilkey's tale of life in the Shantung Compound is taken directly from his own experience. In 1940, just after graduating from Harvard, where his classmates included John F. Kennedy and Pete Seeger, Gilkey traveled to China to teach English at Yenching University. He was smart—he graduated magna cum laude with a degree in philosophy. But his timing was, if not stupid, at least risky. The Japanese had invaded China a few years before and were fighting for control there, and east Asia generally was in a volatile state.

The dangers inherent in Gilkey's situation were born out, when, some time after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he was swept up with roughly 2,000 other westerners and impounded in a concentration camp, though one without the brutality we associate with that term. He and most of the others would remain there for two and a half years.

As such things go, the site where they were impounded was suitable for their incarceration. It was on the site of a one-time Presbyterian missionary compound and came with the necessary facilities: dormitory space, a large kitchen and cafeteria, a bare-bones hospital, and even a ball field.

The inmates were a mixed group. There were more British citizens than those of other nations, but there were also Americans, Greeks, Belgians, Russians and others. There were businessmen in the mix, along with academics, missionaries, doctors and nurses, and vagabonds. Whole families were taken in, so there were men, women and children of various ages in the camp.

And here is what makes the book of interest for political reflection: While the Japanese provided food and other necessities, the inmates themselves had to

organize to meet their basic needs. Shantung Compound was, in effect, a political state, created from scratch.

Consider all the challenges the inmates had to face in order to make their little society function. How would food be prepared and served? How would the young be educated? How would limited sleeping and living space be parceled out? How would violations against good order—thieving and fighting, for instance—be policed. The residents of the Compound even had to carry on something like diplomatic relations with their captors, negotiating for added supplies or access to news and mail. It was a surprise in reading the book how much of ordinary life went on within the camp, including marriages and births, organized entertainments, and even team sports. Gilkey himself marveled at how quickly people grew accustomed to the circumstances of their incarceration.

Here are a few things that Gilkey absorbed as he took part in the Compound's life and later wrote about. One is that decisions about leadership and who would lead were fraught with tension, but followed in some ways a natural course. The men chosen to organize important aspects of the political order—and they were all men—seemed to both exude authority and inspire a degree of confidence from others, as well as deference. Relatively few were ever considered and somehow this sifting took place informally and resulted in acceptable outcomes.

Here is another significant fact Gilkey found in this life under pressure: while there is real nobility in human life and some rose to the demands of their situation, this was far from universal. There were, for example, malingerers, people who refused to meet their responsibilities—cooking, cleaning and so forth—no matter how much reason, cajoling, or shaming they were subjected to. For example, after two internees escaped, the Japanese demanded regular outdoor head-counts to keep better tabs on the internees. One woman got in the habit of showing up late when her group was summoned by a bell, and her lateness resulted in a penalty for the whole group: standing outside an extra hour. Yet despite every effort to convince her to show up on time, she simply refused, feeling no compunction for the unnecessary trouble she caused others.

The necessity of dealing with stubborn, sometimes ugly, realities of human nature is a theme of the book. At times, the precarious order of the Compound threatened to break down, though in the end it did not do so. As the war progressed, for example, and Japanese resources came under greater pressure, the Compound rations of food and coal were cut. And as these resources grew scarcer, stealing increased. Gilkey understood this dynamic and sympathized to a degree. Cold and hunger plagued everyone in the camp and as they bit more deeply people, people were naturally tempted to take risks in order to get extra a few extra carrots or lumps of coal. This was especially true of parents with young children. Yet Gilkey also understood that if the thieving was not checked, it would pose an existential threat to the camp. With rations so tight, removing even a small percentage of food from the general supply would spell real danger, for example. It was perhaps the Compound's salvation that the rise in theft came toward the end of the war and the evolving anarchy, as Gilkey called it, never quite took hold.

In discussing this problem, and indeed in describing the internment community throughout the book, Gilkey talks of the camp community as a small "civilization" more than he calls it a political state. As one reads, one senses that civilization is always in some danger of devolving, and that political order depends on a moral qualities and codes that can lose their authority with surprising rapidity. In the end, the camp's civilization was held together by the extraordinarily hard work and good examples set by a relatively few people, found in various positions in camp life. Without them, Gilkey believed, the relatively decent outcome of camp life might have been drastically worse.

Gilkey's story is full of other, sometimes unexpected, lessons. If, for example, you expect to wind up in a concentration camp and have any choice of where, choose a concentration camp with substantial numbers of clergy and monks. In one of the first crises the Camp faced, the sewage system in a main lavatory backed up, resulting in a mess the foulness of which can be imagined. And it was a handful of mostly Catholic priests who volunteered to step in, as it were, and take care of the matter, which they did uncomplainingly. Among the residents of Shantung

Compound there were also about 400 Belgian monks, who turned out to be among the best citizens of that little republic. They were cheerful, undemanding, bore more than their share of the communal burdens, and were without prejudice against any of the community. The monks were a bright spot in the dark circumstances.

They were, alas for the others, sprung from their captivity early by their order, and this brought to light another interesting aspect of their influence. There were, among the residents, a substantial number of young females, between the ages of, say, 12 and 24. Many were, naturally, interested in the boys and men around them, but constrained by circumstances from normal patterns of courting. In this absence, the monks provided sympathetic, thoughtful, non-threatening male companionship to these girls and young women, which resulted in some very intense attachments. Gilkey recalled the day the monks departed from the camp as one of the saddest of the whole internment and everyone felt their loss. But it was these young females who wept openly.

Langdon Gilkey, it should be said, led a fruitful life after the impoundment and the war. He took up the family trade, which was divinity, becoming a well-regarded and much published theologian at the University of Chicago. But he did not quite follow in the footsteps of his father, who was a model progressive pastor. His view of human nature was darkened by his experiences in Shantung Compound. In response to a colleague who said that he believed in God because of our steady moral progress, Gilkey responded: "I believe in God, because to me, history precisely does not represent such progress." Perhaps by this he meant that grace is real but comes despite, not because of, human nature.

And for me, the story of Shantung Compound has served as a reminder of the elemental realities of political life, good, bad and otherwise.