

September 3rd, 1939.

Many know this date as the day Britain and France declared war on Germany, after it invaded Poland two days earlier, marking the start of World War II.

It's also the day my grandfather, Chan Sze Onn, passed away from a heart attack, possibly caused by kidney disease. He was not yet 50.



Grandfather's house, 32 Orange Grove Road, Singapore (after a photo taken in the 1930s), 2017, shungite, lapis lazuli, jadeite, diopside, turquoise and micaceous pigments with acrylic on Meirat 600 gsm linen-based paper, 25 x 35 cm

It must have been incredibly hard for my grandmother then. Widowed at 42, left to look after 6 children aged between 4 and 14, plus another 2 stepsons, and having to move out of the lovely home her husband built - a 1-acre residence at 32 Orange Grove Road, Singapore. And now another world war, the second in her lifetime, except that this time it would literally come right to her doorstep.



Grandmother, c1920,
hand painted photograph

From a life of wealth and luxury, to one of hardship and uncertainty, my grandmother somehow braved it all, sustaining her family with her cooking and baking. After 32 Orange Grove, they moved about before finally settling in a colonial terraced house in Bideford Road, where they lived for many decades. The house was already furnished, Dutch style, so my grandmother had to give away what furniture she had. The story goes that she had her furniture set outside, as she stood helpless there until a kind Japanese soldier helped her out. Contrary to popular opinion, the Japanese were not all cruel during the war; many were reluctantly forced out of their homes to fight a war they never wanted, and a few kind souls continued to remain friends with my grandmother for many years after.

In 1983, the owner of the property needed to sell it as the street was zoned for redevelopment. The kind and generous owner offered my grandmother a million dollars (quite a significant sum back then) to move out. She then moved to an apartment in Cairnhill Circle, not far away, where my uncle cared for her in her final years. She passed away in 1989, aged 92.