

REUBEN Kandler wasn't sure if he would survive the inhuman conditions building the Burma Thai railway. But he was determined the appalling treatment of his fellow slave labourers at the hands of the Japanese would be documented for future war crimes trials. His hand-written list of 1,000 allied prisoners of war – one third died from disease, exhaustion and execution – would have got him tortured and killed if discovered.

But he concealed it until the Japanese surrender in August 1945, just days before camp guards were due to execute all prisoners.

When he returned to England, Kandler married and moved to Frogal Lane, Hampstead, in 1956. He later moved to Golders Green, where he lived until his death last year, just before his 93rd birthday.

Now his son Richard has documented those gruelling war years in *The Prisoner List* (Marsworth, £7.95).

It is based on a series of taped conversations with Reuben, who rarely talked about his experiences in the Far East.

Richard says: "I put his survival down to luck and pure determination."

"In the face of the facts, and through blind optimism, he wasn't going to consider the fact that he wouldn't be returning home."

Reuben was born in London's East End in 1916 to a large observant Jewish family.

He grew up on the same street as his grandparents, uncles and aunts – his father made clothes in a workshop out back and he witnessed the infamous battle of Cable Street when anti-Fascist protestors prevented Oswald Mosley's black shirts from marching through the East End.

He did well at school and qualified as a chartered accountant in 1938. By the time he was training as a radar operator in 1941, his brother Harry was captured by Rommel's troops in North Africa. (Luckily, Rommel disobeyed orders to execute all Jewish prisoners and handed him over to the Italians.)

In October 1941, Reuben was hurriedly posted to Singapore, arriving in late November in time for the first Japanese bombing raids on the island.

From a Malayan rubber plantation, he listened in on enemy movements and warned of imminent attacks. When British troops retreated back to the island, he helped to protect Singapore's Keppel Harbour where civilian women and

Secret horrors on list with a 1,000 names

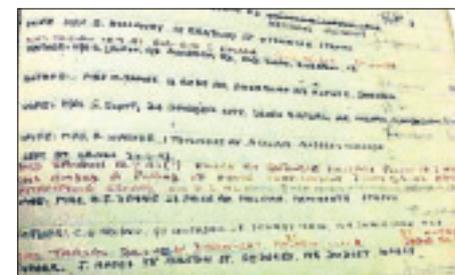
A British soldier risked his life to document the inhuman treatment the workers building the Burma railway suffered from the Japanese, writes **Bridget Galton**. If he was found out, it meant torture and death



Face to face ... Reuben Kandler, in 1941, aged 25, just weeks before his posting to Singapore. Kandler, in 1961, aged 45.



A left-hand page: from his record book, which lists names, ages, occupations, in his own handwriting.



A right-hand page: The entries in red ink relate to causes of death. There is a reference to an execution at Saigon following a failed escape.

children were fleeing to safety. But the Japanese bombing raids on the troops and civilians crowded onto the island were almost continuous, the bodies piled up and the British surrendered on February 15 in what Churchill called "the largest capitulation" in British history.

Reuben was among 130,000 allied troops held in Changi barracks, with more civilians, in nearby Changi jail. But six weeks later he was among 1,000 POWs sent to Saigon to work on the docks unloading cargo. Conditions were overcrowded, the work hard, rations meagre, beatings frequent and dysentery rife, but it was paradise, compared to where they went next.

The 700 fittest men arrived in Thailand in June 1943 to build the

260-mile death railway to Burma. By the end of the first month, 140 were dead from disease and overwork. Kept in awful conditions, they undertook backbreaking work from dawn to dusk, breaking stones, hauling rubble, cutting trees.

Starved until skeletal, they died in their droves from cholera, beri beri and malaria, endured anaesthetic-less amputations when ulcers became infected. Sick men were beaten out to work. Those unable to stand worked on their knees.

Once the railway was completed in October, the pace slackened, but many continued to die of disease.

In January 1944 news of their treatment reached the House of Commons in a statement by

Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. The same year Reuben and a fellow prisoner held a makeshift Rosh Hashanah, service, celebrating with rice cakes and rice coffee.

Then, in early 1945 at a camp within sight of the infamous bridge over the river Kwai, prisoners were ordered to dig a huge pit and machine guns were installed at four corners. They later discovered a mass execution was planned for 18th August, the expected invasion date for Allied troops in Thailand.

While suffering from trench foot, Reuben worked in the camp office and there compiled a list of the original 1,000 prisoners who started out from Changi, hoping to use it as a record in

future war crimes trials and to inform parents what had happened to their sons. He collected and compiled lists from the Sgt Majors and carefully recorded, occupation, army number, prisoner number, next of kin, address, then cause, place and date of death.

When Allied officers were transferred to another camp, Reuben became camp adjutant and successfully hid the list among Japanese papers, retrieving it just before the guards burnt all evidence of their crimes.

Upon liberation, Reuben weighed six and a half stone and would suffer recurrent bouts of malaria for the next decade. The PoWs were referred to by General Slim, (dubbed by one

emaciated wag; General-Not-As-Slim-As-Us-Lot), the "forgotten army" but a fund was set up to help them, which Reuben helped to administer for many decades.

He returned to Edgware where his mother had moved during the Blitz and headed a project to build a new synagogue, serving as honorary officer of the United Synagogue for 24 years.

Richard Kandler says: "He was a very scrupulous, honourable stoical man, not given to outbursts of anger."

"He came home determined to get on with what was left of his life and he didn't allow his experiences to embitter him."

□ *The Prisoner List* (Marsworth, £7.95) is available from www.theprisonerlist.com.

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Recommended Read
MY ANIMAL LIFE by Maggie Gee, Telegram Books, £16.99

There's poetry and Motion

EVENTS at the British Library in the coming weeks include the latest Poetry Hour organised by writer Josephine Hart.

Hart enlists a host of high-profile literary and theatrical names for her regular readings at the Euston library.

The latest on May 25 is a tribute to Philip Larkin, who died 25 years ago this year. Tickets for the event in the conference centre are sold out but there are a few available for the overflow room.

The poetry hour starts at 6.30pm and tickets cost just £2. Novelist and critic Victoria Glendinning, playwright Ronald Harwood, former poet laureate



Andrew Motion (pictured) and Sherlock Holmes biographer Andrew Lycett take part in a debate on the importance of literary heritage.

In a digital age, does it matter whether British literary manuscripts remain in this

country? Should libraries be proactive in acquiring the papers of living writers and how do writers decide where to sell or donate their archives?

These are just some of the questions which will be asked at the free event on June 9, organised by The Royal Society of Literature and the UK Literary Heritage Working Group.

Questions will be invited from the audience and Joan Winterkorn, a director of Quaritch Rare Books and Manuscripts, will talk about the company's valuation work on archives and manuscript collections.

Tickets for both events can be booked at www.bl.uk.