

An illustration by Wang Wanbin



The illustrated new version of Zhang's memoir was recently published.



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We have learned about the history of the era from textbooks, history books, novels, TV and movies. But her non-sensationalized, rational and very detailed descriptions of the front lines really impressed me. Those words bring that history to life and reveal the simple fact that any small wave in the river of history is a tsunami for those experiencing it.

She was born in the north-eastern Chinese city of Harbin in 1914, the year World War I broke out. It was also a time when China was undergoing dramatic social and political upheaval, with domestic warlords fighting for power and foreign influences penetrating the country.

Her parents nicknamed her Juju, which translates as “union,” in the hope that the small family might weather turbulent times together. Unfortunately, it was not to be.

Her mother died shortly after a younger brother was born, when Zhang was only 2 years old. The only picture

she had of both her parents was later lost when she fled south from Japanese troops.

When her father took her mother's coffin back to his hometown for burial, he left Zhang with an affluent, childless Russian couple who lived on the same street. They gave her the Russian name Zoya, meaning “life,” and she called them Wawa and Jiajia.

“In my heart, Wawa means mom, my dearest mom,” Zhang wrote in her memoir. “She was the greatest mom, who raised me from age 2 to 19, when she passed away.”

Illustrator Wang said she was especially impressed

by how her adopted mother tried to give Zhang the best education possible in such turbulent times, insisting that she should learn Chinese and go to Chinese school to maintain her heritage.

“Thanks to that education, Zoya turned to such a great woman,” Wang said. “Throughout the memoir, during all those difficult times, she never complained. Instead, she always strived to learn more knowledge and improve herself. She had a simple patriotic heart.”

Wang said she was inspired by Zhang's legacy to go back to university 10 years after

graduation and earn a master's degree.

“I really admired that resilient, optimistic and constantly learning spirit of hers,” she said. “Now, I have graduated with a master's degree from Xiamen University.”

Zhang returned to Yenching University in 1942, when classes resumed in the southwestern city of Chengdu. She had to sell the Browning pistol to pay for travel and tuition.

“I lived a poor life as a student in Chengdu,” she recalled in the memoir. “But it was the happiest and most relaxing year in my life.”

Her son Sun had only a

vague notion about his mother's activities during the war and had to piece the puzzle of her life together after her death.

“My mom was an ordinary woman trying to survive in an extraordinary era of life and death, joy and sorrow, war and broken families,” he said. “There were many ordinary people like her in that era — the soldiers, the front-line nurses, the farmers. They all contributed in their own ways and made personal sacrifices. We Chinese always remember our history; it is a part of how we move forward.”