POSTWAR INVASION OF JAPAN

A Veteran

In 1945 soon after the war ended, I was stationed in Sasebo, Kyushu but soon I was chosen as the interpreter of a party which was to make an investigation of the Osaka-Kobe industrial area on the main island of Honshu. One dark night (the nights are really dark in Sasebo) the Osaka-bound group was assembled and given final instructions. Everything went off as though we were going out on an operation the next day, and about the only thing missing was a final synchronization of watches.

Early the next morning we rolled out of bed and lugged all of our belongings down the steep concrete steps onto a waiting truck, which took us to the railroad depot. We discovered to our dismay that the coach we were to board was on a different track a couple of hundred yards away. The leader of our group, a commander, saved the day. He sent for the station master and made me explain to him that when the train was about to leave it should reverse to our track and stop until we could load our baggage. The station master became all flustered and insisted that such a thing was impossible, but the commander stood firm and would not budge an inch. Meanwhile, it was getting close to the time of departure, and the station master in desperation offered to have his men tote the baggage. This was evidently what our commander wanted, but he, in magnificent control, gave only a weak assent. There and then we discovered one of the mightiest tools at our disposal when we had manual work to be done.

There was one thing I noticed on the train ride which struck me as being rather interesting, the blinds placed in front of all munition plants. Such blinds could be anything from concrete walls to wooden screens, with the one apparent purpose of shielding vital war plants from the direct gaze of train passengers, who could get a momentary glimpse at best. The Japanese appear not to have been too sure of their vaunted national solidarity. Another thing I noticed from the train windows was the havoc which the recent typhoon had wrought on the rice fields. The rice had been weighted down and was about to be harvested when the storm struck, flooding entire fields. Even the fields which suffered least could probably not yield but half of what they would have in normal times. This was another tough break the poor

would have to take, but I am convinced now that they can take anything.

When we reached Omura we went to an airfield and waited there for three days for a plane that was supposed to take us to Osaka, but we waited in vain and had to return to Sasebo. We started out again on a destroyer this time.

We went ashore at the fishing village of Wakanoura which serves as the fleet landing. It was late afternoon and blue-clad sailor boys were gathering at the boat pier to return to their ships after liberty ashore. Immediately after landing I saw the first obvious differences between occupation in a Marine-administered area. Here the rules of occupation seemed to be much more liberal; there were more shops, more people in the streets, more fraternization—an overall atmosphere that was much lighter and gayer.

We drove through Wakayama which is largely destroyed, and were let off at the terminal of the railroad lines between Wakayama and Osaka. While waiting at the station for our train, I was approached by several civilians and plied with all kinds of questions and requests. At first I had an awful time trying to pick up what they said because they talked so fast. One kid wanted to know the cost of taking a course in electrical engineering in the States; another asked if I knew his brother who was presumably in the American Army; several asked me to be let into our coach if we had any room to spare. It was a good thing that the train finally pulled in, for my resources were being taxed to the utmost.

We had been able to commandeer a whole coach for our party, but actually took up little more than a third of it. Since there was such a large crowd waiting outside, the leader of our group generously offered to let the civilians fill up the rear half of our coach. As soon as the word was passed, the crowd rushed in, some even through the windows. We had cause to regret our offer because the crowd began to push into our half, and it was only after threatening and forcibly pushing them back that we had any room left for ourselves. I learned a valuable lesson in dealing with Japanese crowds, as a matter of fact with any crowd —never give an inch, for the good you do is such a trifle compared to the evils that may result.

It was midnight when we pulled into Osaka. All the other trains had stopped running for the night, but the immediate vicinity of the entrance turnstiles was jammed. These were the

people awaiting the next morning's trains. They slept on the concrete floor or formed circles and jabbered away continuously to while away the time.

It was about 2 a.m. when we finally pulled up to the New Osaka Hotel which is not too bad by American standards, and damn good for this place. We went to sleep in the lobby, on chairs and sofas, but our sleep was not to be enjoyed too long. Along about five in the morning an excited staff sergeant woke us and begged us, the enlisted men that is, to "make tracks" as hastily as possible lest some irate general discover us enlisted trash sleeping on his doormat. After several wild goose chases, we were unceremoniously deposited at the enlisted men's transient center located on the top floor of a department store.

The first night here, three of us decided to take a look at the red-light district about which we had heard so much. Directions were readily obtainable from other soldiers and we easily found the place. Although we had heard the district was rather pretentious, we were not prepared for its vastness. Block after block was filled with establishments which all vended the same type of ware. The girls are listed on placards (sometimes illustrated with photographs) which are placed in the lobby of the establishment. One can ask for them in person but apparently a request for a girl does not necessarily commit one to filling out an engagement. I guess that I will leave out the details because all I know of the inner workings is simply hearsay.

At a couple of houses I struck up conversation with the madames. Their line of talk dealt strictly with business and nothing else. They wanted to know how many troops were coming altogether, how long they would stay, and so forth. One asked me the proper way to ask for a tip.

One of the following nights I dropped into a cabaret for a drink. It had a crude dance floor, a number of tables and chairs, and a host of girls. It cost two yen or about thirteen cents for a dance which lasts a little over two minutes. The sociologist in me comes out every time I visit any of these places, and the first thing I do is to get into a conversation with one of the girls and ask her about her story. Most of the girls working at the cabarets appear to have gone through high school, and claim that they are there trying to pick up English. They are also out for all the money, candy, and cigarettes they can get. The girls actually receive surprisingly little for their work, but by playing favorites

they can expect good tips. That is why so many working girls aspire to be dancers.

One evening a friend of mine and I were stopped by two fairly good-looking girls who propositioned us thus: They would go anywhere, do anything, if we would in turn teach them to dance and also teach some conversational English. But not all of them are so enterprising. I asked one of the girls working in the department store downstairs to do my laundry, offering to supply the soap and to pay her well. The girl makes only forty yen (less than three dollars) a month and could easily make as much by doing washing for a few people, but she refused. I was told later that she considered that taking in laundry would not be in keeping with her job of salesgirl.

I was out with another girl another night who made a remark I heard once before, but dismissed at the time as a crackpot's idea. Now that I heard it again, I wondered if it doesn't represent the Japanese attitude toward the Nisei. She asked me if I did not feel that I had been hopelessly entangled in the meshes of war when I was compelled to fight what she termed my "blood brothers". She went on to express pity for us Nisei for what we had to do. To her and other Japanese (as well as certain Americans, I suppose) everybody must forever remain true to his ancestral people and to be disloyal to his kin is considered impossible. Her point of view on this particular issue was completely the opposite of mine. The only comfort I could derive from the remark the girl made was that she had retained the ability to pity me in spite of the want and suffering she may have gone through and in spite of the obvious advantages I enjoyed.

When I first learned that I was to be sent to Osaka, I said to myself, "Here is your chance to visit Suemori's folks." When working at the prisoner of war camp on Guam, Suemori had asked me to look up his parents, and I was only too glad to do so, for he was so extraordinarily interesting that I was curious to see from what kind of Japanese home he could have come. Before going to his home I had stayed up nights trying to figure out some appropriate way to introduce myself and approach the delicate matter of prisoners of war. I had still not hit on anything suitable when I knocked on their door. It was about ten in the morning on a weekday, not exactly the most fitting time for a dramatic scene. A middle-aged woman came to the door and stopped. I hesitatingly asked if this was the house of one Kakuzo Suemori, a person to whom I had been entrusted a message. She

answered that it was and I continutd, "Please forgive me for my rudeness in speaking to you, but I am an American and am not familiar with the correct words to be used. I have come to tell you that your son Takeo Suemori is alive and well. I saw him last in a prisoner of war camp."

When I finished the sentence there was a moment of silence. I was afraid then that the traditional Japanese attitude concerning prisoners of war had proved stronger than parental love. But there was no need for me to have had any doubts as to how she would receive the news—she gave me such a relieved smile, and asked me in. Over the customary tea which she insisted on spiking with a few drops of whiskey and the more-than-precious sugar, we conversed slowly. Mrs. Suemori was obviously overjoyed.

> I could never believe that he was dead. When they announced that Okinawa had fallen, they failed to say that all the defenders had met honorable deaths as they usually did when one of our islands was lost. Everyone assumed that the entire garrison had been annihilated, but it seemed strange that, if all the troops had fought to the death, that they had not been credited for their determination. As you know, any time there is any doubt, idle minds begin to turn out rumors. In this case, there was a story circulated that the troops were not all killed, but that some had been captured. And so, although all of us with relatives on Okinawa more or less assumed that they were dead, there was still that small hope that they might have been saved.

Later in the day, I went with a friend of mine to a drinking place he knew of which is set in beautifully landscaped grounds. As soon as we entered, we were invited by another party to join them, which we did. I was amazed at the variety of food and the amount of liquor flowing. The revelers were young businessmen of obvious means. They told me,

> Yes, we knew we coudn't win, but we were helpless. It was a case of do what you are told or suffer the consequences. We in business suffered the most because we lost our stock bit by bit, and our business was then all but taken from us. We could not operate unless we complied strictly with the laws handed down to us. Now that we have lost the war, our leaders have left us holding the bag. We knew we couldn't win. They started the war twenty years too soon."

And these unfortunate businessmen eating and drinking at a cost of about one hundred and fifty dollars a head continued to pour out their troubles to me,

> We are rather fortunate as compared with the average man because we can still eat regularly, but we certainly miss our tobacco. If there is one thing you can do for us, it is . . ."

I excused myself at that point.

That evening I returned with my friend to the Suemoris. We brought along a case of beer and a bottle of sake, with which we would be welcome anywhere, to liven up the evening. I met the

rest of the family then, including another one of the Suemori sons. This one had just been discharged from the Army a few weeks previous. He had been a first lieutenant in the Shipping Engineers and was on one of the last ships from Manila and Okinawa. He was on the deck of a ship at Ujina when the chain reaction took place at nearby Hiroshima, and his face was burned. At the first sip of sake, the area of the burns turned pink. The outline of his cap visor and his collar showed very clearly. His father, the elder Suemori, had been importing radio parts from the United States for ten years or so and spoke surprisingly fluent English. As the evening wore on and the drinking progressed, my friend and I found ourselves more and more outspoken, and we were soon telling them what was wrong with Japan. And then, as usual in Japanese drinking parties, we got around to singing. I finally heard for the first time the famous song, "Umi Yukaba" which was sung to Kamikaze pilots before they took off.

One week after arriving in Osaka, I was sent out on a trip to the end of the Wakayama peninsula to aid in the inspection of naval defenses there. We travelled the whole way by jeep, no mean achievement considering the roads. The typhoon a month earlier had washed away parts of the road, and we were the first to try it. At one fishing village, the whole town including the women turned out to fill in a gap in the road for us. Going by car had its advantages, however, for we were thus enabled to see some scenery which I imagine even local inhabitants must be unfamiliar with. I guess that no matter what part of Japan one may go to, the most striking thing is the natural beauty of the scenery. Some Americans say, "These people don't deserve such lovely surroundings." My own feeling is rather different. I cannot help but wonder why people living amid such beauty could ever nurse thoughts of conquest and world domination. If ever natural beauty could bring contentment, it should have brought it to the Japanese.

We were the first Allied people to go through this area, and the roads we went over were lined with women who stood at a respectable distance, waiting to bow in unison to their conquerors. The one sure indication that no American troops had preceded us was the fact that none of the kids cried out for "cigaretto" or "chocoletto".

In addition to the scenery we were thereby able to view, travel by car had the other advantage of permitting us to avoid the railroads. The trains were loaded with Japanese soldiers return-

ing from overseas. Seeing them I realized what a miserable thing it must be to a soldier on the losing side. The Japanese tradition of soldier worship is certainly a thing of the past, for these returned soldiers were now neglected and even despised. It is no wonder that many mustered-out veterans have turned to armed robbery and banditry. I suppose such lawlessness must be one way of easing the pain of frustration. I would think, though, that after all the misery and suffering that some of them have been through (particularly those who starved on the bypassed islands) that the people at home would be more sympathetic with them.