

## Manchurian Days

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*As lively as her sparkling white suit with pink polka dots and its matching pink hat, she alternately laughs and chokes with tears as she speaks in a rich Kanazawa dialect, with Russian, Chinese, and Manchurian words popping up to punctuate her points.*

*She was one of more than eight hundred thousand Japanese colonists who moved to Manchuria after the region, as vast as the entire North-eastern United States, was severed from China by the Japanese army beginning on September 18, 1931, in what was called the Manchurian Incident. "Ruled" by the newly installed Pu-Yi, the last Emperor of China, who had been toppled while still a child in 1911, the new state of Manchukuo was created in 1932. It attracted "pioneers"—bureaucrats, soldiers, farmers, shopkeepers, industrialists, thugs, and idealists—from all over Japan seeking to make new lives and to carve out an empire on the Continent.*

I wanted to be a pilot when I was in sixth grade. Whenever an airplane flew over, I'd rush out of class to look and was often scolded by my teacher. I was a "militaristic girl," I guess. I thought I had to fly a plane or do something! I loved Joan of Arc and I wanted to be like her. I was so scatterbrained and bubbly. I don't know why, but I thought I had to go to Manchuria. I had a strong sense of mission. I even got an award from the *Hokkoku* newspaper for selling flowers to raise money for our soldiers.

My father was a retired navy man and ran a shipyard in the small town of Nanao in Ishikawa prefecture. I had eight brothers and sisters. My father urged us girls to become Red Cross nurses. "What soldiers appreciate most are good nurses," he kept saying. Japan was a very militaristic state back then, so my five elder sisters became nurses. They didn't have to pay for their training. In fact, they were actually paid for going to school.

My dream was to be a kindergarten teacher. I studied one year at the Nursemaid Training School attached to the Metropolitan Education Association in Tokyo. My parents struggled to support me during my training. I returned to Nanao and wanted to pay them back for my education fees, but there was only one kindergarten in town and nobody would take me on. Still, that's what I wanted to do, so I was ready when a schoolmate of mine told me of a chance she knew about. She was from

Manchuria. "Furuko-san, you have to come," she said warmly. "They're building a kindergarten there." I brushed aside my parents' opposition and went to Fushun, Manchuria. I was so full of enthusiasm. I wanted to do everything. I believed "we have to take care of the children of Manchuria because Manchuria has been taking care of Japan." I thought I might even marry someone in Manchuria.

My mother was the daughter of a temple priest and married a military man. She hadn't been able to do what she had dreamed of doing, but she supported me in going out on my own. I was nineteen. She gave me one hundred yen without letting my father know. It cost sixty or eighty yen for the boat and rail fare to Fushun. That was a lot of money. Mother told me, "However good a man or a woman may appear on the way, don't be taken in by them. Go all the way to your destination at Fushun." Beginning on the boat from Shimonoseki to Korea, I felt anxious. So I was completely silent. I ignored everybody, all the way. On the boat and on the Chōsen Railway and on the Manchurian Railway, you got your way by using Japanese. You always went unchallenged.

At Fushun, the South Manchurian Railway Company had an open-pit mine outside the town that produced good quality coal. A large number of foreigners worked for the Fushun mine. The company had various businesses—mines, hotels, railways. The town was quite well developed. There were about a thousand women working there. That was still a time when married women stayed at home. Many were from the Homeland, including those who, like me, had jumped at the chance to come, and those who had come, relying on their relatives. The children in my care at the kindergarten were all from the Fushun office of the railway company. I loved them. After about a year I lost my voice and developed a slight fever. The head of the kindergarten and the head doctor of the children's section of the Fushun South Manchurian Railway Company Hospital examined me and ordered me to be hospitalized immediately. I made no real progress, so they told me to return to Japan. There was nothing I could do about it, so I went back to my hometown. I was heartbroken.

Back in Nanao, I was hospitalized in Kanazawa City and cured in two months. It was pleurisy resulting from the dryness. As soon as I was cured, I yearned to return. I was on leave of absence status from my job. Again I ignored what my parents said and I was soon on my way back to that kindergarten in Fushun. When you boarded a train and traveled across the wilderness of Manchuria, the red sorghum fields stretched on for an eternity and the evening sun set far, far away. It was so magnificent. I was seduced by that great expanse called Manchuria.

December 8, 1941, came during my second stay in Manchuria. It

was a bitterly cold morning. Everything was frozen. When the children came in and said good morning, one child—by coincidence her name was Tōjō, Tōjō Eiko—said “Japan and America have started a war.” I told her that couldn’t be, but she said she’d heard it on the radio. I was shocked. I knew America was large. I wondered why Japan would start a war against such a large country. But our lives were not much affected then.

Miss Iwama, the head of the dorm where I lived, was such a warmhearted person. She loved the Manchus. She used to take me to Manchurian villages. “Let’s go and play, Yoshie,” she’d say, and we’d go to all kinds of filthy places. Whenever she found children, she’d pat their heads and play with them. She was good in their language. She took me to small local theaters and on the way home we’d eat melons and things. I really came to love Manchuria, but it didn’t seem to love me. Once more I came down with pleurisy and had to part from her and the children in sorrow.

I had gone to Manchuria twice and now Manchuria seemed very close to me. But I realized that my physique was not really suited to it and I knew that each time I fell ill I caused many people much hardship. Again home in Nanao, the subject of marriage came up. The kimono-shop owner had a nephew who lived in Manchuria and wanted a bride from Japan. The only conditions he set were that she had to be physically healthy and capable of using the abacus. I loved the abacus. His nephew was really dear to him and the shop owner asked me to marry him. He showed me his picture. He looked like a nice person. The nephew was returning to Japan, and so a formal meeting was arranged in his uncle’s drawing room. We talked for two or three minutes, then I wanted to go to Manchuria so badly, I just told him, “I’ll go.”

When I was about to be married, my mother’s elder sister came all the way to Nanao by boat and train to see me. “Yoshie,” she said, “are you really going to Manchuria? Do you know what’s happening to Japan now? It’s the middle of a war.” I just answered that Manchuria’s all right. It’s full of Japanese. The Soviets are good friends. Then she said gravely, “If Japan loses the war, you won’t be able to get back.” “Don’t say such things,” I told her, but she wouldn’t stop. “If you managed a temple as I do, it would be clear to you. The temple had to donate beautiful Buddhist altar fittings and temple bells to the country for metal. Recently, even the hangers for mosquito nets have had to be contributed. Everything’s vanished. I donated my own gold rings. Can such a country win? If Japan loses, Manchuria will be divided up. If we’re going to lose, it’s better to die together here.” At that time, deep inside me, I thought, what

outrageous things this old aunt says! I told her Japan will not lose! My father said so. Anyway, the marriage was already arranged.

Again I set out for Manchuria. It was 1943, in the middle of the Greater East Asia War. My husband had started his business in Tōnei, in the northeastern province of Manchukuo, after being discharged from the army there. Tōnei was the closest town to the Soviet Union, along the northeastern border of Manchuria. It was a special area, subject to special laws and controls. There were about three hundred thousand troops along that border. Maybe fifty thousand additional Japanese people, like railwaymen, bankers, schoolteachers, and their families, were woven in among them.

His store was well established. It had a signboard out front saying “Authorized Military Vendor.” I still remember the phone number—Tōnei two-five-three. There weren’t many phones in those days. Here and there were empty houses. Those people must have gone home, thinking it would be dangerous. Maybe that means we were the only ones who didn’t know what was coming.

The hamlets of the Manchurians were separated from us Japanese. We had four hired helpers in our store. One was Chō-san, who was fluent in Japanese. He had a long, oblong face. He was in charge of dispatching and supervising the shipping. Two youngsters—we called them Boy-san, twelve and thirteen—worked for us too. Sweet kids. We also had a girl who did laundry for me. “*Taitai*,” they’d call me, “*Okusan*” in Japanese. Up to that time I had always been the one who’d been used to do others’ work. Now I was Madame.

On New Year’s Day we were invited to Chō’s house for a feast. He was the leader of his hamlet, but my husband bought many of the things they made there. He called my husband “*Jiangui*,” meaning “Leader.” My husband told me not to confide in Manchurians. Treat them kindly, warmly, he said, but in your heart, you cannot completely trust them. My husband said, “They’re likely to have vengeful feelings towards Japan.” Even the kids who worked for us would sometimes blurt out to me that Japan was bad for taking away their land.

My husband bought a large dog from the army, a German Shepherd named Esu. It was a good dog and watched over me while my husband was away. My husband told me that they trained the dogs to bite only Manchurians. They’d dress someone in Manchu clothes and they trained the dog to attack when he came into a room, taking a big bite of his calf. The man’s life wouldn’t be endangered, but he couldn’t move. He could then be investigated to determine if he was a spy. Esu was brought up in that way. We told Chō-san never to wear Chinese clothes. My husband

didn't tell me everything, but there must have been many other things he knew, because he had twice been a soldier.

We had a big house. Since we had many large rooms, my husband invited anyone he met from Ishikawa prefecture to come by for dinner. The principal of the school was the head of an Ishikawa Association and my husband served as its secretary. The head of the tax office was also from Ishikawa prefecture. People from Ishikawa stuck together. We had all the food we wanted—cans of bamboo shoots, dried tofu without limit, and shiitake and other mushrooms. Whenever people came, I fed them. It seemed my purpose in life and I enjoyed it. I soon became pregnant. I was ecstatic at that, too.

In Japan there was so little already. Clothing was rationed and food had begun to disappear. Simply having so much food made Manchuria attractive. My husband would get purchase orders from the military for items specified and go on purchasing trips to places like Shanghai. If he thought those things would sell well, he'd buy large quantities and bring them back. He bought from Japanese trading companies and sometimes from the Manchurians. "Authorized military vendor" really meant "broker." He made a great deal of money. I was amazed you could make so much money from the military. I was brought up in the family of a poor military man. When my father died from an accident at the shipyard, we got eight hundred yen in life insurance. My mother said that money came to us from our nation. It seemed a huge sum.

I told my husband, "This must be a dream!" "Why?" he asked me, and I pointed to our bankbook entries showing deposits of three thousand yen, five thousand yen. My husband would order fish roe, yellowtail, or pickled radish from Mukden by the boxcarload and they'd ship it to us. I just couldn't believe you could get money this way. I wondered if I might not be punished for eating things like pound cake.

Soldiers came to relax at our place and I'd make simple country dishes that would delight them. One might ask me, "Okusan, what would you like to eat?" I'd say, "Pound cake!" "Great, I'll get it!" and he'd go to the commissary and buy butter, flour, sugar—the military had lots of everything, anything. If I said, "I'd like cream puffs," someone might bring four or five. They took good care of me! The chance to eat Japanese food and talk to a Japanese woman was enough for them.

There I was, a real country girl, without pretense, like their elder sister or somebody's wife, really almost a high-school girl who chatted on about all kinds of simple things. They appreciated it. My husband's business was booming and he delighted in making people happy. And I enjoyed it, too. I had no idea what lay ahead.