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Flight

FUKUSHIMA YOSHIE [2]

May 30, 1945, the Soviet Union announced that it would not be renewing the USSR-Japan Nonaggression Pact of 1941. War with the Soviet Union now became a likelihood and the Imperial General Headquarters accordingly issued orders to the Kwantung Army to withdraw to a defensive triangle in southern Manchuria, with the Korean border at its base. Troops were deployed southward, and many officers' families were sent south by rail. In northern Manchuria, and in areas along the Soviet border to the east, lived as many as 300,000 Japanese civilians and "agricultural pioneers." No efforts were made to evacuate these people, since the policy was to avoid "provoking" the Soviets.

When the Soviet forces finally entered the war against Japan on August 9, 1945, most able-bodied men among the settlers already had been called up by the Kwantung Army to replace troops dispatched to other theaters of war. Women, children, and old men, left in confusion in towns and villages in the forward areas, were scattered across the countryside by the first waves of the Soviet tank and air attacks. Tens of thousands died in a chaotic flight. Some were killed fighting the Soviets, others committed suicide individually or killed each other in mass suicides, while many others drowned crossing rivers, died of disease or starvation, or fell victim to bandits or Chinese irregular forces, including units of the Communist Eighth Route Army. Large numbers were raped and murdered by Soviet troops. The people of Manchukuo, which Japan had claimed to be the "harmonious land of the five races," turned against their Japanese masters. Many of the people who had been dispossessed by Japanese settlers now wreaked revenge on those who had conquered them.

Fukushima Yoshie, a kindergarten teacher, married a military vendor and settled with him in Tōnei [today Tungning], near the Soviet border north of Vladivostock. Her husband was called up in July 1945, leaving her at home with their infant son.

The ninth of August dawned a beautiful morning. I was giving breakfast to my dog, Esu, when I heard the sound of airplanes. It must be a drill, I thought. Then I heard *"Pa! Pa! Pa!"* and saw silvery things falling, shining in the sun. I telephoned the Kempei office because I knew someone in the military police, but nobody answered. I turned on the radio. It was about seven. An announcer read "News Bulletin! News Bulletin! The Soviet Union has broken diplomatic relations and declared war." The Soviets were coming! My son, Masaaki, had been born on September 25, 1944. He had just begun to walk, but wasn't fully weaned. I put him on my back and grabbed an emergency rucksack I had prepared earlier. I also took a tiny Buddhist sutra with me.

The world had been turned upside down. The residents of Tōnei had no idea which way to escape; everyone just wanted to go whatever way the Soviets weren't said to be coming. Some shouted, "Into the mountains!" Others, "Follow the rail lines!" Someone started off and everybody followed in a long line. But that night, when the Soviets caught up to us, we all fled in different directions. From that first night, you were totally on your own. If you ran into someone familiar, you greeted them and maybe walked together, but soon enough you were separated. I had no idea where we were. Tōnei was far into the wilderness of northern Manchuria. There were no roads, and I'd never seen a map.

It was hell. Perhaps the railway tracks would take us to Mukden. I found them and walked along them. Those who collapsed just died by the roadbed. But it wasn't long before you couldn't walk the rails anymore. The Soviets started using them to take surrendered Japanese soldiers toward the Soviet Union. We had to move into the mountains. They were a wilderness, sometimes even a primeval forest, and there were dead bodies all over the trails.

In the depth of the mountains, my son developed a fever. He had trouble breathing. I had abandoned the Japanese practice of carrying him on my back, and was holding him in front of me by this time. That was so I could see him better and offer him my breast. My son's breathing grew more and more labored and his fever shot up. I was beginning to think I'd have to die if he died, when a group of Japanese soldiers appeared. One of them was wearing the Red Cross insignia. He said immediately, "Measles. He probably won't make it, Ma'am. It's better for you to reconcile yourself to that." I begged to know what medicine he carried. He admitted he had some German-made medicine in an ampule good for pneumonia, but he was reluctant to waste even a child-size dose of it. I clung to his arm and begged him, tears streaming down my face. I wouldn't let go. Finally, he gave my son that medicine. It cured him.

There were many places we passed where the Japanese had fought savagely against the Soviets. We were afraid of being caught. If the Manchus found you, you'd be stripped of all you had. But the Soviet forces were the most frightening. They killed Japanese just for the sake of killing. I saw many who'd been bayoneted. Heaps and heaps of bodies in the wilderness of Manchuria.

Japanese soldiers gave us women hand grenades and told us to die with them if the time came. I threw mine away somewhere in the mountains. It was too heavy for me to carry even one day. They also gave us cyanide. There probably wasn't a single Japanese woman who didn't receive a little packet from military men with the admonition, "It would not be good for a Japanese woman to be raped." But I got so soaked, what with my sweat and the rain, that mine just melted away.

The situation we were in didn't allow anyone to look after somebody else for very long. Some soldiers would look reliable and be very affectionate to my son, patting and playing with him. But when the child cried at night, everybody hated me. The soldiers would ask me either to move away from them or kill my son. I encountered this situation many, many times. I resented the soldiers bitterly, but the day came when I was to see the matter from their side.

I again found myself walking along the railway tracks. I came across a little infant girl in a good kimono, lying on a neatly arranged pile of her things. She even had a little shade on to shield her from the sun's direct rays. Her parents must have died, or been killed, or left her in the hope that someone else would take her. That child was so precious, only about five months old. I held her in my arms, I now had two babies with me. This didn't last even a day. I felt terrible remorse. I left her near a Manchurian village where people would find her. When it comes down to saving your own child, you become like that.

I caught frogs and cooked them on sticks over a fire. Whenever it rained, "escargot" would come out and I'd eat them too. Somehow, my breast milk started to flow again. The leaves of the goosefoot plant were edible and rich in vitamins, so whenever I saw them, I picked them. Then I gathered grass to burn and boiled the leaves in a can. I was given matches sometimes. They were so valuable! I kept them dry no matter what. Without them you felt lonesome at night. You couldn't make a fire even if you wanted to. But I liked nighttime. Sleeping with my son for a few hours, I was able to forget my hardship. I always knew morning would come, though.

I have no idea where or how far I walked. I once got a ride for four days on a bumpy horse-drawn cart to the city of Botankō [Mutanchiang today]. That's where a Manchurian, Mister Ku, asked me to come to his place. He said he owned a theater. "I know people in authority, so come."

He claimed he was pro-Japanese and used to work for the Kempeitai. His Japanese was excellent, and from him I learned for the first time about the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "Japan will never recover," he said. "Your husband, if he was a soldier, will probably be taken to Siberia. He will never return. You have a nice child. I want a Japanese child. Please become my wife." I refused. Mister Ku had three beautiful concubines, but their eyes looked strangely out of focus. Everyone at his house smoked opium at the same time each day. He showed me a bed made of ebony. Still I told him no. Again he asked me to marry him. That night around eleven o'clock I put my child on my back and opened the door. It was the end of October. Manchuria was already bitter cold. The skin on my hand stuck to the metal bolt of the gate when I slid it back to escape.

Sooner or later I found a freight train heading in the direction of Harbin. In the boxcar were five or six soldiers, deserters, who'd all gotten a place there by paying money. I was the only woman with half a dozen men. They had warm-looking fur coats. My son and I had only a dirty old blanket. For four or five days we traveled like that. Whenever the train stopped, Russians would come to investigate. One time, the train stopped and the baby cried. The soldiers got irritated, "Why do you let your baby cry? If they catch us they'll kill us." A kind man among them said, "If that happens, we'll just put up some money and pay off the Soviet soldiers." As we feared, the door to the car flew open. When they realized I was a woman they took my baby and tried to rape me. I cried out "*Spirochete, spirochete!*" That means "syphilis" in Russian. Besides, I'm sure they saw I had boils and sores from mosquito bites all over my body. Finally, they left me and the baby alone.

Several days after that, the train stopped for a long time. Diarrhea got really severe. I couldn't eat. Not even bread. My son, too, had diarrhea. I couldn't endure any more. The sunlight streamed into the train. One of the soldiers had opened the door and was going to relieve himself. It seemed like we must be near Harbin. We'd already come quite far south. I looked out the door. It was a long way down to the ground. I held my son and jumped. He was all I could hold. I left behind the few things I still had, including my last pictures of my husband, but I still had the tiny Buddhist sutra inside my clothes next to me.

I don't remember how far I walked before I reached the city of Harbin. The whole area was in total confusion. Japanese beggars, Manchurians, and boastful Russians now settling in to run it, all mixed up together. A free lodging place for evacuees from the distant areas like ours had been set up in the former Musashi Department Store. I took up lodging there. It was quite large, and a great many people were there.

There wasn't any heat—nothing but a pile of sorghum husks. You'd huddle together under them to get some warmth. "Typhus is spreading, so be careful," people warned me. I decided to put up an advertisement announcing that I was here. I'd seen many such announcements on electric poles and walls. I wrote, "Mr. Fukushima Masaichi: Yoshie made it here. Please contact me at the Musashi."

The thing I did most was beg. I think I could be a beggar even now. You simply say, "Help. Please help me." As long as you don't have any pride or feel humiliated, it's easy. Eventually, I borrowed enough cash to go into the business of selling tobacco one cigarette at a time. It was warm in the sun. Carrying my son, I took up a place where lots of Japanese passed by. I would describe my husband and then ask them if they'd seen him. But I didn't even know the name of his unit. His name alone, Fukushima Masaichi, wasn't enough. Yet I did see people find each other that way.

Eventually, my son and I were able to return to Japan. It was February 1947. I remember how green the wheat seemed as we approached the port of Sasebo. My mother-in-law met me at the station when we finally got to Kanazawa, so I knew my husband wasn't back yet. For years I lived thinking alternately that he might be alive or that he was already dead.

One day in 1955, I received a letter from a man in Tochigi prefecture. He wrote, "Fukushima Masaichi, who died in my prison camp four hundred miles from Moscow, might be your husband." He had been dead since May 18, 1946.

Today, I get my own pension and my husband's memorial pension, and my son helps me out. We now run the two nursery schools I've built since I "retired." I have finally achieved piece of mind. But a few times a year, when the Japanese children who were left behind in China come to Japan to look for their families, it all suddenly comes back to me. My son says, "I could have been like that." When I see those people, I feel guilty at the life I'm now leading. I'm this happy and they're still suffering from that war.