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Konaka Yotaro

Writer, Professor of Seisa University. Born in Kobe in 1934. Spent his childhood in Shanghai, where he witnessed the outbreak of the Pacific War, an experience which was to shape the future of his international activity. Majoring in French literature at Tokyo University, worked (1958 - 1964) as drama director for the NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation). His 1972 novel, "Okoku no geinin-tachi" ("Artists of the Kingdom"), depicts the labor movement among broadcasting artists. With writer Oda, Makoto, formed the "Peace for Vietnam!" Committee (called "Beheiren"), Japan's first citizens' campaigning against the Vietnam war. Most notably, the committee helped the U.S. army deserters. Sympathetic towards student movements, he has written many documentaries on the subject. Since the 1980s, an active member of the Japan P.E.N. Club, organising campaigns in support of Kim Dae Jung, of Korea, Lech Walesa, of Poland and Waclaw Havel, of the Czech Republic. His 1983 novel, "I Have Visited Poland" ("Boku wa Poland wo tabishita"), is a reflection of his experience of Solidarity superimposed upon his childhood memories of Shanghai. 1983-84, Fulbright Professor, teaching Japanese literature and peace movements at West Virginia University and elsewhere. Has served as President of CCA (Christian Council of Asia) and Executive Director of the Japan P.E.N. Club. Published works include "Seishun no Yume: Oguri Fuyo and Nephew Kyotaro", featuring a Japanese Communist in Hitler's Germany, and an autobiographical novel, "La Mere", based on his mother's memoirs. Active in anti-nuclear movements and journalists' campaign to preserve and safeguard Article 9 of the Peace Constitution of Japan.

The following novel, "A View from Westerplatte" is from "I Have Visited Poland"

“A View from Westerplatte”

Once again, we set off in our Fiat.

We pass a pine forest and soon after a cluster of dwelling houses. The road cuts through

an embankment of fields. To one side, neatly cultivated land, tractors parked here and there, the farmhouses look large and new. To the other side, fields overgrown with weeds and the houses appear to be in state of decay.

“This is privately-owned land”, says Waclaw. So the orderly side belongs to a collective farm. I hadn’t expected to see so sharp a contrast highlighted by a mere strip of a road. All the same, the farmers have managed to cling on to their own land.

By and by, the buildings increased in number. In the distance, beyond some houses in the fields, a medieval castle came into view.

“There’s Malbork”, said Andrzej, leaning eagerly forward in his seat.

We crossed a river about a hundred metres wide. I’m told it’s the Nogat. There was a church and a restaurant on this side of the castle. We position ourselves next to a window overlooking the river. Andrzej engages in negotiations with a plump waitress wearing embroidered clothes. It seems we can manage a chicken cutlet. For starters, we decide to have some vodka. Back in Warsaw it was already impossible to obtain any; here, by contrast, it was beer which was unavailable, while vodka could be had anywhere at all. With vodka entering the head and the images of Sztutowo fading, we started off merrily for the castle.

The castle was deeply moated and dry. Originally, the water would have come directly from the Nogat. We pass a wooden drawbridge which serves as a guard box. Once over the moat, we go under a stone castle gate, arriving at a cobble square with tenements on two sides. Climbing up along a stone path, we come to a second castle gate which leads onto the keep. With a castle of such proportions, it is not hard to understand its layout. As you enter the gate you see a little courtyard. There is a small hut in the middle with the sculpture of a cock on the rooftop. That’s the castle well. In a U-shape around the well rises a two-storey building. The wall facing the courtyard is a gallery. In the hall, a tableau of a Polish knight valiantly engaged in battle adorns a wall. His enemy a Swedish prince.

Andrzej says: “the German name for Malbork is Marienburg. This used to be East Prussia.”

Could this be the land that the German Knights, or the Teutonic Order, once colonised? As early as the 1200s, at the instigation of Konrad, the Duke of Mazovia, the Teutonic Knights attacked Prussia and founded the cities of Torn, Marienburg and Elbing.

However, their advance eastwards was put to an end to by Alexander Nevsky on the ice-bound Lake Chaudusk. In later years, they founded the city of Konigsberg. In the fourteenth century, they extended their territory into Pomerania and Danzig.

The man who stood up to them was Ladislaus the Second, the King of Lithuania and Poland, later to be known as Jagiellon the Second. As the Duke of Lithuania, he become

the king of Poland through his marriage to Hedwig and, at Grunnenwald-Tannenberg (the Polish name, Sztewark), in 1410, completely defeated the German Knights. The Order lost forty thousand men.

I had no idea what duel it was that the painting at the Malbork castle was depicting, but the youthful knight striking down the blue and white Swedish emblem had all the makings of a David striking down the dragon. There was an inscription with some names at the bottom of this battle scene, but, being in Polish, made little sense to me. A reflection came to me that it might as well have been Atsumori Taira hurling himself into the sea in the embrace of one of Genji's soldiers.

I left the painting and, casting a glance at the spears and swords on the walls, made my way to the innermost part of the castle. It seemed like a huge gymnasium with an arch opened wide onto the Nogat.

Andrzej beckoned to me.

There was a hole in the stone floor, rather like a manhole, surrounded by an iron railing. A thick wooden board hung over it suspended on a chain.

"Take a look at this!"

"Probably a toilet", suggested Waclaw.

"No, it was for throwing people down", corrected Andrzej.

Underneath, the hole was empty, looking straight over the dry bed, or rocks rather, of the River Nogat. The height was dizzying.

"It was through this hole they used to cast dead bodies out", he continued.

"It would've meant instant death even if they had been alive"

"Perhaps it was the place of execution for traitors"

And then again, perhaps for some noble lady without any connection to the enemy who had aroused a king's anger by an act of betrayal with one of the knights?

The knight is thrown in first; above him, like a butterfly, flutters down the noble lady.

Afterwards, half submerged, they become carrion for the fish and the birds. Had it been winter, when deep snow covered the whole landscape, the icy wind from the Baltic would probably have frozen their bodies stiff at once.

The journey back took us along a wide road. Kazimierz, our driver, said it was an autohahn built by Hitler. As if chased by the setting sun, we hurried back to Gdansk. Andrzej and his friends began to worry about the time. It seemed they had one more important site to show me.

We drove past the entrance to the Lenin shipyard and continued along the shore.

Suddenly, this city of old churches and lovely, tree-lined boulevards transforms itself into a rough harbour port-town. I see tall cranes inland soaring over the docks. We cross a steel flyover. Below, a railway siding, a road under construction, quayside warehouses.

Walking along a promenade on the finished embankment, I am startled by a large freighter passing close by. The colour of the sea is dark blue. A beautiful forest with young leaves stretches along the shore. Inside the forest, a small tank on display. I hear it belonged to Sucharski's men. But who, in fact, was this man?

The promenade turned away from the shore. Large signboards, like panel walls, were arranged at the side of the road. There were some photographs too. Lengthy explanations in English and Polish: those in English brief and simple.

In September of 1939, when the massive German battleship, named Schleswig-Holstein, turned up in the Free City of Danzig, it was Major Henryk Sucharski who defended this very spot, called Westerplatte, with a force of merely 200 infantrymen. A photograph shows him as a small man with a dreadful, cylinder-shaped, black military hat on his head. It could well have been taken in the days when wars were still fought on horseback.

At any rate, all that Major Sucharski had at his disposal at the time were: 75 mm cannon, 41 machine guns, 161 rifles, 40 pistols and hand grenades.

But what of this "Something-or-rather" Holstein? Does it not sound like a species of cow? The Holstein was completed in September 1936 and equipped with four 280 mm cannons. It left Keel on 25-th August 1939.

Suddenly, I began to feel uneasy about the whole thing: was this Schleswig-Holstein really a battleship, or had I misread the information on the board? As I was brooding over the problem one day, a professor of Japanese literature at the Humbolt University, and frequent visitor to Tokyo, Mr Bernhard, showed up. I asked him whether that really was the name of a ship.

"That's right, a battleship".

He spoke with a slightly embarrassed smile on his face.

"She left East Prussia, which was still German at the time, for Gdynia, the other port of Danzig, on what appeared to be a friendly visit. Then, on the 1-st of September, she attacked both Danzig and Westerplatte.

"And that marked the beginning of the Second World War, did it not?"

"Yes, that's right".

"How old were you then Mr Bernhard?"

"I was six"

"I see, that means you were a year older than me".

Now, the sad remains of whether the "Hitler Yugend" or the Japanese "Young Nation", we glanced tenderly at each other like two middle-aged men in a bar who had been caught singing old military songs.

My research had unearthed this document: "Hitler's order to attack Poland".

- 1. Now that all possible attempts at a peaceful solution to the pressing problem of the German eastern border have been exhausted, I have decided to resort to force.*
- 2. The attack on Poland is to be executed following the preparation of a "white incident". Note the change to the army's attack, which is to occur in a state of nearly full concentration.*

There is no change to either duty assignments or strategic targets.

The date of attack: 1-st September 1939.

The time of attack: 04.45 hours.

The above date and time apply to operations directed both at the port of Gdynia-Danzig as well as the Dirschauer bridge.

(Walter Hoffer: Nazi Documents)

Here is an excerpt from a war history book I've read:

"Poland was forced to wage this war on her own. Statistically speaking, the Polish army was in no way inferior to that of Germany. Poland had forty divisions against Germany's fifty-two. The Polish side, however – having delayed troop mobilisation in anticipation of Britain and France's wishes – had only managed to form half of its force. What is more, six divisions on the German side were armoured ones: the Polish side had virtually no tanks at all. The air force had in the meantime lost half its planes. Poland had deployed its troops in an advance position, the idea being to defend the industrial area concentrated in the West and, fatuously, to advance into Germany. Two German corps, arriving from East Prussia and Silesia, came behind the Polish army and cut off its communications. The German armoured divisions pushed ahead owing their advance to their speed rather than fire power. The infantry had merely to secure the rear. The Polish army broke down in chaos."

(A.J.P. Taylor: An Illustrated History of War: World War Two)

Back to the signboard.

For seven long days the 210-men-strong Polish garrison of the Westerplatte battery under the command of Sucharski fiercely defended their position with one 70 mm cannon and 41 machine guns against the opponent's 4000 troops – or twenty times their number. At the hands of Sucharski's the German army suffered losses between 300 and 400 dead. He believed that, if he defended this place to the bitter end, Britain and France would lend a helping hand, that the world would not desert Poland. But help was not to come. While I was reading the signboard in Gdansk, I wondered – reflecting on the communiqués in war-time Japan – whether the phrase "died in honour" would appear anywhere.

Ten dead, thirteen seriously wounded, ammunition all used up – the garrison of Westerplatte surrendered on day seven. Rescue never came from far away across the

Baltic Sea. Sucharski was taken prisoner, but after the liberation became a general in the People's Army.

It occurred to me to ask Stefan and the others how old they were at the time.

Waclaw, a harbour pilot, was eleven. Stefan was six; he was in a place a hundred kilometres away from Czystowo. Kazimierz, our driver, was seven and living in Kercychy. On the 1-st of September he was supposed to enter school. Because of the war, the new school year had to be postponed. Andrzej had not even been born. So we all seem to be of the same generation. I was five years old.

Soon the forest ended and we came to a section of the canal. There was a fairly steep hill overlooking an inlet. The front had a flight of chiselled, broad steps. Above rose a huge monument.

"I am standing at Westerplatte".

The inlet continues in a straight line from the bay and onwards, all the way to the docks. On the far bank is the Lenin Shipyard, its cranes like birds piercing the sky with their beaks. Father into the inlet, some coast guard vessels lay at their moorings.

The steps on this hill may be a hundred metres wide and climb to the height of thirty metres. A stone tower at the top rises higher still. At its foot, a bunch of flowers tied with a ribbon. It is almost evening now and a lone couple is standing, arms locked, looking on.

Stefan, Andrzej and I go up the steps. As we climb, I have a feeling I have walked up a similar flight of steps before.

Where, though?

I must have been six or seven years old.

That's right.

The year was 1941, the sixteenth year of the Showa era. Shanghai.

I am climbing up the steps of Da Chang Zhen. The white steps reflect the dazzling sun. I am with my father and another man, his younger acquaintance. He would have been that architect, the father of little Koh.

"The spacing of these steps is just right, is it not?" says the man,

"You're absolutely right!" My father sounded impressed. The man died in the war.

Ever since, whether I was climbing the Great Pyramids at Giza or the ruins of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, steps of this kind have always reminded me of Da Chang Zhen.

An enormous war memorial had been erected at the top of these steps. And whenever I think of Da Chang Zhen, the site of a fierce battle in the Shanghai war, I am also reminded of the Wu-sung Battery. It was before I entered the National School that my father and I took a trip to the Wu-sung Battery. The weather was also sunny. We stepped

into a petrol engine car from the wooden platform behind the barracks of the Naval Brigade. When we got out, my father and I went for a long walk along the banks of a creek. It was a broad one. A junk moved slowly upstream close to the wind, its red sail swollen in the breeze.

“Here! Take a good look! If you work the sails skilfully, the junk will proceed against the wind, you see?”

As an only child, I spent all my time with my mother. I would follow her about like a shadow. Yet, it is my father’s words that I remember.

The creek was perhaps four or five metres wide. The water had a brown colour with delicate wrinkles on the surface. The junk continued up the creek under its red, triangular sail. A Chinese man wearing shorts and some children were inside the boat. There was a pillbox on the other side of the creek. Although half-destroyed and overgrown with weeds, it had an open red brick entrance through which we were able to get in. After that, my only recollection is of myself sitting astride a cannon ball shell on top of a height which dominated a vista over the Yangtze. The shell had been filled with concrete. A photograph from that time still remains.

Can all children remember the times they went out somewhere with their mother and father with the same feeling of loneliness and despair?

Of life’s solitude? Or are such sentiments peculiar to an only child? Could it be the particular atmosphere of my home, with my father’s dislike for his job, my mother’s grumbles and my father’s incessant, mournful silence? He came from a family of Kyushu’s landed gentry, being the seventh son of a girls school headmaster. He graduated from the School of Commerce in Tokyo, and found a job in a bank owned by a conglomerate. My mother was also a daughter of a school headmaster in Kobe. The man who arranged for the two to meet was my father’s superior at the office – an unusual man. My father then moved to Shanghai to work in the fascinating field of currency exchange. That is where the war found him, dispelling any dream of New York or London.

He left for Shanghai in 1940, one year before my mother and I made our delayed crossing. We sailed from Kobe, passing Nagasaki on the way. Upon waking up, I saw from the deck of the *Tatsumaru* the East China Sea change its colour from blue to yellow. It was the Yangtze...

The yellow-coloured sea swayed on the other side of the deck’s handrail; I made a point of getting up early on each of the eight subsequent crossings we made between Japan and Shanghai to find out if the sea would change colour to yellow, but I never saw it again.

Muttering the “Wu-sung Battery” to myself while standing there at Westerplatte, made me suddenly realize the oddity of it all am I actually allowed to feel the way Stefan and

Andrzej were feeling? The Polish troops at Westerplatte were fighting the Germans to stop their invasion. Thus if anyone has the right to feel empathy with the memory of Westerplatte, it must surely be the Chinese. I am the offspring of the invading side, and if there were a German child standing here, that would be me. Does it not follow therefore that I have no right to feel inspired by the Polish defenders of Westerplatte?

Upon my return to Japan, I opened a book which had long been lying on my father's bookshelf called "The Endless Shanghai", by Togo Yoshida. As a pre-war publisher, he appears to have moved to Shanghai alarmed by the passage of the Public Peace Maintenance Law. His book was published immediately after the war by the Chuokoronsha Publishing Company.

It tells the story of his journey up the River Sucho. We read how the author, feeling pressed for money, proceeds into Chinese territory with the intention of purchasing for twenty thousand Yuan a plot of land concealing boxes of pig hair.

"I entered a path from the main road, heading for the place, when I was challenged for the first time by a Japanese sentry posted on a bridge along the way. The sentry was already past his prime – around fifty – and, hearing that I was Japanese, asked if I thought the war would end by the time the cherry trees blossomed? He reacted with melancholy silence after I told him that, given the circumstances, it probably would not finish so early.

After five or six steps, all I saw at first were all these corpses: skeletons and mummies clad in Chinese uniforms were piled up in a heap. A large number were still clutching guns in their hands or had grenades stuck in their chests. There some boxes apparently filled with pig hair, which had been used in lieu of sandbags. The heroic Chinese soldiers, who must have fought to the finish, were lying prostrate, their guns resting on the boxes. Almost inconceivably, a lone head supported by the chin and helmet sat precariously on top of one of them, its hollow sockets staring into the distance.

I stood gazing for a while, unable to make a move, then rushed to get away – not out of repulsion, but of shame. I was devastated with shame for attempting to sell to the Concession for the sum of twenty thousand Yuan a piece of land which these patriotic men defended to their last breath."

Such is the land where I grew up.

However, it would be inaccurate to contend that I was being torn by the guilt of responsibility for the war while I was at Westerplatte. I had feelings of affinity for Stefan, Waclaw and Kazimierz. An affinity akin to the sorrows of this age – war and death, foreign lands and armies; my own thoughts in the midst of it all.

Are we not all children of the same age?

To be sure I was able to live along the Yangtze only because I was being protected by an

invading army.

In “Notes to Travellers”, from a 1942 publication by the Central Chinese Railways, under the title “Travels in Konan”, we find a following passage:

“In conclusion, it is needless to say that this line is dotted with the battlefields of the China Incident. Let no visitor forget that there is neither a mountain nor a river here that has not drawn the precious blood and sweat of our brothers in their glorious task of building Greater East Asia.”

There is no mention of the blood of the Chinese people.

The solitude that I experienced on the banks of the Yangtze could have been little more than a sensation which an only child – growing in a foreign land and deprived of playmates – had while on an outing with his young mother and father. Yet the utter despair of that age which continued to dog me later in life, the despair and solitude I always bore inside me, had become impossible to endure.

Before my eyes the Yangtze, filled to overflowing, carries its brown water in a powerful torrent. The other bank is invisible. From time to time a junk passes by, and then disappears as if it had fallen over the edge of the sea. I had a long life to live. I might have to say good-bye to my parents. I could not be coiled around my mother forever. I had to get out and live among total strangers.

Was it the fear of an only boy-child who realizes he has to go on living by himself one day? Or in a wider sense, the uneasiness caused by living among what was ultimately a foreign population, no matter how large the Japanese community may have been? Or was it perhaps the anxiety lurking in the mind of a child about the direction his own country, Japan, was heading in?

Man and his epoch surged before my very eyes. Did I not, as a child, glimpse in the current of the River Yangtze a reflection of history? Could not even a child of seven sense the course of the epoch’s drift?

It all came back to me in the Polish city of Gdansk. No, not quite, actually – I had never truly forgotten. As a matter of fact, I had always intended to write about it, but nothing somehow came of it. As I watched the Yangtze glide along, I first thought of writing about the solitude I felt at the time, hoping I might reconcile myself to it. And despite always having that intention, I never wrote anything in the end. In my forty-seven years of life I had written about a great variety of things, except this particular one. It was in fact Westerplatte which made me take up my pen in this manner. Even then, it was not immediately afterwards that I was able to write about this long-hidden episode. Then one spring, sleepless night, at dawn, seven months after my return from Poland, I made my attempt – with a demon-like excitement – to describe that solitude of mine.

The night of the 8-th December, 1941 was just as dark. About four in the morning, my

father received a telephone call. We were attacking American and British warships, I was told. I went out onto the veranda: in the darkness surrounding the New Park, search lights played in the sky. The war had begun.

There was relatively little of the war that I was able to see with my own eyes.

I remember Japanese marines posted at the house of a Chinese notable at the forward end of the street where I also lived, called Taiikukairo. I often used to play with them firing blanks into the air. Every now and then, some soldiers would disappear. They were sent to the interior never to come back. I believe the fifty-year-old sentry that Togo Yoshida encountered on the River Sochu was perhaps not unlike one of these men. Although the sentries I knew were all in their twenties.

A long row of Chinese women, who had emerged from the morning mist bringing foodstuffs from the countryside on their shoulders, was lined up by the soldiers. They were examining the contents of their sacks by thrusting bayonets in from the top. Each time grains of rice fell out of the sack and spilled onto the ground, the plump Chinese women cried and begged for mercy, nervously folding the fabric on the back of their trousers. A similar scene was re-enacted after the war one day when we were shopping at Akabane and Ikebukuro. Standing still on a platform, carrying a rucksack on my shoulders, I thought to myself: "Well, what happened to those Chinese people in Shanghai is now happening to me".

On my way to the National School, I used to walk along a narrow creek. A Chinese farmer's house stood there and a boy, about my age, always used to follow me with his eyes. He had a harelip. Later, as I was playing on the bars in my Junior High School, a classmate came along and gave them a good shake. The rotted base collapsed, sending me sliding on my face across the gravel on the ground. I was left with a mouth injury reminiscent of a harelip.

"Oh, dear", I thought; "Now you look like a Chinese".

As a young child, I was not yet aware of being Japanese. And so I continue to live this life of a chrysalis, forever spinning the cocoon of the solitude of that age. A solitude in the shape of the lush, tall grass that hovers over the Wu-sung Battery. At Westerplatte, I saw myself just as I had been forty one years before.

Following the visit to Westerplatte, we went on to look at the church at Oliwa. It was founded by a Prince of Pomerania and boasts one of Europe's most unique organs. On the ceiling, high above the organ, are rows of mechanical figures capable of intricate movement. As soon as the organ begins to play, a sun and a moon start rotating as choirs of angels and cherubim rise to play their trumpets.

The congregation was in the middle of a Sunday evening service to the Virgin Mary.

They kept repeating the words "Swieta Maria" as they sang – that is how the phrase "Santa

Maria” is rendered into Polish. Suddenly I become aware of Waclaw’s loud responses and saw tears rolling down his craggy cheeks. Watching him, I noticed moistness on my own face. “Swieta Maria, Swieta Maria”.

Thus ends my story of the excursion.

By the time I got back to the student hall, the clock had struck midnight. My room was up in the attic. Saint Mary’s church loomed in front of my window, its cross brightly lit. To my right the pinnacle of the church rose darkly into the sky. The Town Hall was on the right. A patch of light illuminated the portico. I have an eerie feeling some of Rembrandt’s night watchmen are going to emerge round the corner.

A quarter moon appears over the cross. Once more I hear Waclaw’s voice: “Swieta Maria”.

Suffering – an essential part of the human condition – defines the spirit of this land, does it not? Not pleasurable then, but suffering is here at the centre of the human condition. Humanity craves torture. Thus what this nation desires in no mere return to political freedom. It is more profound than that: one might say it is about revealing the nature of the human condition itself and of humanity’s need for suffering. To reach into the abyss – it is this kind of spirituality that is filling the sky of this ancient Hansiatic city, casting a ray of light from the moon and all the way to the cross.

I do not know why I suddenly remembered my wife’s baptism a week before my departure. Why the need for haste?

Wars, invasions, history. Enemies and allies. Am I these people’s enemy or ally? I am one of them, for humanity – standing in the presence of something greater than itself – is together as one. That is how I felt. To face responsibility is not an impossible task. Nor is it to make sound political judgement. But over and above, there is something else that motivates human existence. I do not doubt it: as humans, we share a similar fate, which transcends the distinction between enemy and ally.

To the left of me the moon: to the right of me the cross. And the sun has yet to rise.

Translated by Adam Poludniyk & Carles Sandy

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