

Under the Approach

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

This place is a long way from anywhere. A shimmering sheet of green rice fields stretches out flat in all directions, stitched together by a skein of narrow roads and occasionally embroidered with a huddled stand of trees or an angular gaggle of houses. Insects drone as the vesper breeze hustles lightly over the rural landscape. The day gives way to impatient dark.

This twilight calm is sundered by the whine of jet engines as an airliner passes overhead. Minutes later, another follows, and after an interval of silence, yet another. Narita, Tokyo's far-too-distant international air terminal, is just a few kilometers away; the landing approach passes directly over this farming community on the Boso Peninsula, across Tokyo Bay from the capital.

Set back from one of the meandering, anonymous roads is a building that at first appears a clone of all the others dotting these fields: stuccoed white walls, a gabled tin roof, festoons of television antennas and electric wires. On the roofpeak, however, rises a cross. The house is not a house: it is a church of the Russian Orthodox faith. Its few members—less than 20 now—struggle to keep alive the tradition of their belief, a tradition that began late in the last century when some local families were converted by priests from Tokyo's Nikolai-Do Russian Orthodox Cathedral. They remain a tiny minority, but a fervent one. There is no conflict with their non-Christian neighbors. Modern Japan has been tolerant of religion; it is seen as something ultimately personal. Syncretism is the custom: it is common for Japanese to have Shinto weddings, Buddhist funerals, and to celebrate—well, sort of, anyway—Christmas. Japan certainly has its share of problems, but religious strife is not one of them. The kind of murderous conflict evident in Northern

Ireland, the Balkans, between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in India, and between Israel and its Muslim neighbors fairly boggles the Nipponese mind. The dwindling congregation here is due not to any religious intolerance but simply to the fact that the young people of the area leave for Tokyo after high school and rarely return.

Illuminated by a mixture of candle-flame and electric light, the sanctuary thrusts square shafts of brightness out through its windows. I peek in. The altar is decorated with striking icons. Saints portrayed in an Italianate style hold Scripture written in Japanese kanji; above them, their names are inscribed in the cramped and contorted Cyrillic letters of Old Church Slavonic. These remarkable paintings are the work of a woman artist named Yamashita Rin. In the final years of the 19th century, she left Japan to study painting in Italy. From there she proceeded to St. Petersburg, where she was tutored in the art of the icon. After some years, she returned to Japan, where no recognition was accorded her as the first Japanese woman to study art abroad. Her most notable works decorate the Nikolai-Do. Those in this humble church are very little known, and the local people seem to prefer it that way. They have no desire to turn their place of worship into a tourist destination.

There is no service this evening, and the church's caretaker extinguishes the lights one by one. He locks the church door, and with a soft *oyasuminasai* bids me a gentle rest as he drives away. All that remains is the shadow-light of the rising moon and the distant keening of an inbound airliner.

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.



