

# The Quest for My Japan

By Antoinette Manz

Memory is like a phantom mirror. It sometimes shows things too far distant to be seen and sometimes it shows them as if they were here. (Mishima: *The Sea of Fertility*)

When we arrived in Tokyo, coming from New York almost three years ago, it was a moment of great expectation and apprehension for me. I was returning to the land where I was born after half a century of great changes and upheavals. Would I encounter anything to match the memories of my childhood? One thing stood out clearly in my mind: wherever I had been in the world, I had always found a soulmate amongst the Japanese.

The first sight to greet me as our plane began its descent toward Narita airport was Mount Fuji towering majestically above the clouds, its perfect cone ablaze in the morning sun. Could there have been any sign of welcome more propitious to one returning to her beginnings?

I was born in the year of the rabbit in Kobe. My father had come to this country some ten years earlier to pursue the silk-trade. He had joined a Swiss trading company founded in Yokohama in 1866. Swiss firms played a major role in exporting raw silk from the Far East and Swiss nationals were employed as silk inspectors for various trading companies. Moreover, Japan had become one of the most important exporters of silk worms to Europe in the second half of the 19th century because of pebrine, an infectious disease of silk worms, which had a catastrophic effect on European silk production.

My mother had come to Tokyo as a

tutor to the daughter of the British ambassador. She used to spend her summers on the shores of Lake Chuzen-ji with her pupil. Foreign diplomats kept sailboats called "larks" on the lake and the Chuzen-ji Yachtclub was a fashionable place to meet in the "roaring thirties". *Gai-jin*

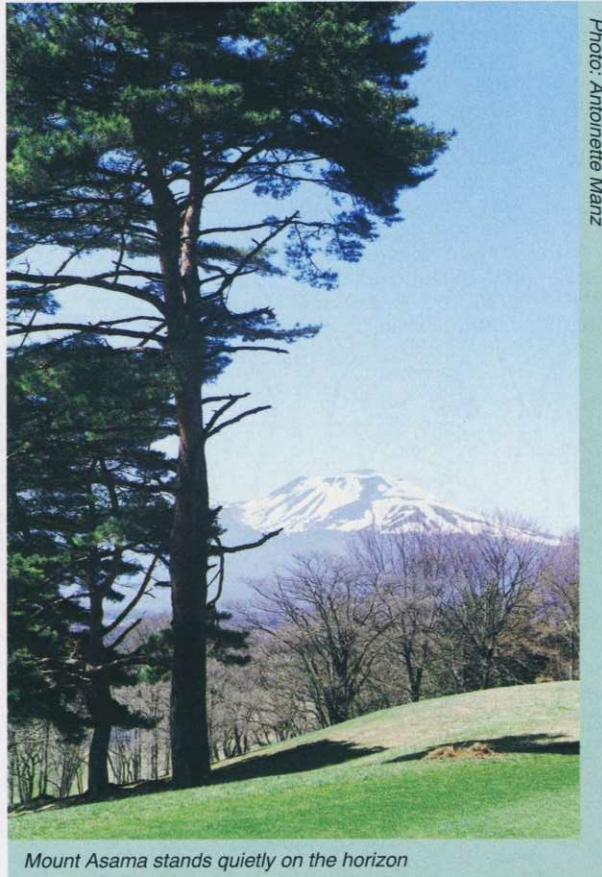
and Karuizawa. The vagaries of war determined our moves. My most vivid memories relating to Kobe are the accounts by my mother of the great flood which ravaged the city on July 5th, 1938. It has been described as "the most disastrous flood in the history of the Kobe-Osaka district."

(J. Tanizaki: *The Makioka Sisters*) My mother's greatest terror were the rats; rushed along by the waters they would snatch at anything. These stories of terror resurfaced with great vividness, when I saw pictures on television of the disaster wrought in Kobe by the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995. Once again Nature had struck with awesome power and brushed aside man and his constructions in an instant to remind him of the frailty of his condition.

In the homes of some friends from Kobe, I have come across silver objects just like those my parents brought to Europe with them: glass decanters intricately laced with silver and indented on three sides to make them easy to hold and dainty little figurines to decorate the dining-table with. There was one particular silversmith in Kobe, whom my father revisited in the 1950s. He had a jewel-case made by him: silver on the outside, engraved with chrysanthemums, and three lacquer-ware drawers on the inside. This is my most

cherished memento of my "furusato".

My recollections of Yokohama are linked to the large seafaring vessels docked in the city's vast harbour. When a great ship came ashore after a voyage of many weeks or even months, splendid parties were thrown



Mount Asama stands quietly on the horizon

Photo: Antoinette Manz

from the same country were bound to come together so far away from home. My parents celebrated their wedding on the birthday of Meiji Tenno.

During my six years' stay in Japan we lived in Kobe, Yokohama, Tokyo,

on board. The sound of dance-music would waft across the harbour scintillating with myriad festive lights. At the hand of *Ama-san* I watched my parents go to these parties; and I felt very proud of them.

It was from Yokohama that we eventually set sail for Europe when the great war was over. We started our voyage on a British destroyer, then boarded an aircraft carrier in Hong Kong. It was a thrilling six weeks' adventure aboard huge battleships fording the wide expanse of the ocean. There were stopovers at places like Trincomalee, on what then was still Ceylon; here for the first time, I saw features that were neither Japanese nor Caucasian; later, when sailing through the Suez Canal, I caught a glimpse of camels ambling atop the embankment; then came a long, dreary, and very cold journey on the train from Glasgow to Dover, followed by another short ship-haul across a very choppy English Channel. The closer we came to the place, which I was told, was my country, the more daunting this prospect became in my mind: where I was heading bore no resemblance whatever to what had hitherto meant home to me.

My reminiscences of Tokyo are linked to the British Embassy Compound, where we stayed. At that time, my father was part of the Swiss legation and was working in the department in charge of the protection of foreign interests. I enjoyed romping around the beautifully kept embassy grounds. The best game of all was to scamper after the guards parading at the grand gate. The grey buildings are still there and so are the tall, silent trees, but the guards shouldering their guns have gone.

In Kojimachi French nuns from St. Maur ran a girls' school, where I was enrolled in the kindergarten. It was on my way to school that I learnt to listen for the humming motors of approaching B-29s and to identify the whining sound of bombs falling from the sky. Tokyo was experiencing the first bombardment by American

"super-fortresses".

My mother was an avid reader; the love of books has been her most valuable legacy to me. I used to trace the shelves of her book-case with my finger and read the titles on the backs of her tomes, so many of which were about the Far East: Pierre Loti's "*Japonneries d'automne*", Paul Claudel's "*Cent phrases pour éventails*" and Kikou Yamata's "*Masako*". Ms Yamata, celebrated in the literary salons of Paris as "Mademoiselle Chrysanthème", was married to the Swiss painter Conrad Meili. Having returned to Japan in 1939, they were living in Kamakura. They were frequent guests of our compatriots who were installed in the American Embassy. The Swiss could still invite Japanese friends in these war-torn times. The little band of expatriates sought one another's company whenever possible and the Meilis were especially welcome because Kikou was a very able interpreter of the unified monolith Japan which had broken out over Asia. Two of Meili's watercolours have kept their memory alive for me.

By the time we had moved to Karuizawa, I was old enough to explore my neighbourhood on my own. I would ride my tricycle through the shady lanes surrounding the "*machi*" and venture into the properties closed up for the season. Once I encountered baleful eyes lurking in the dark; I ran away, my heart pounding! Karuizawa was my secret garden, where the imagination would conjure up thrilling stories to entertain me on my solitary wanderings. Scraps of information on the war gleaned from adult conversations were woven into this fabric. Behind one wooden gate lived a Mr.L who was said to be a spy and a drunkard. Not knowing exactly what to make of either attribution, I was particularly eager to catch a glimpse of him. Later I learnt that he had committed suicide and I decided that he must have been very ugly! One place, pointed out to me as strictly out of bounds sparked my curiosity in

particular: a camp of civil detainees. I thought up all sorts of dramas taking place up on that hillside, especially after I had espied a woman chasing another with a butcher's knife held high.

The spectre of war made its presence felt everywhere. There was an awesome burden of words unspoken weighing upon the small community sheltering in the safety of the woods, where the light was always tinted by the trees overhead and the shadows on the ground were long all year round. Beautiful Mount Asama stood silent on the horizon. In the winter time the snow collection in the erosion channels made a most beautiful design on its flanks. Once I do remember hearing fearsome rumblings from its fiery interior and waking up to find he had spewed ashes over the snow-covered ground around our house.

We often went hiking in the mountain ranges surrounding Karuizawa; lying at an altitude of 1000m my parents pointed out many similarities with the Swiss alpine regions, thus forming in my mind my first images of my fatherland.

Everyday life in Karuizawa was quiet and comfortable. In 1937 a pretty little wooden church somewhat Nordic in style had been built. Seven years later my brother and I were baptized there. Together with the old Mikasa Hotel, considered to be the oldest wooden Western-style building left in Japan, it continues to give testimony of the lifestyle before World War II.

Now that I am living in Japan once more, I have revisited all these places. It is the year of the rabbit once again. My life has come full circle. I have reaped a full harvest of memories and the reminiscences have fallen into place like brilliant lozenges in a kaleidoscope. JTI

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