

# Age of Enlightenment

By Hiroyuki Iwaki

There is a word in Japanese, *yakudoshi*, that might be roughly translated as "the bewitching age." It is 42 for men, and I think about 33 for women. But since I am a man, let me assume 42.

Of course, the *yakudoshi* 42 is under the old system, since this is an old tradition, and I suppose this means that it is not the person's age as it would be counted today but as it would be counted under the old system.

In the old system, you started out at age one and your birthday was on January 1, everybody picking up another year when the year changed. So somebody who was born in December would be two years old on New Year's Day. As a result, a person who was 42 under the old system might be only 40 or 41 under today's system. But that's a distinction that most people ignore.



the average life expectancy was 50, somebody who had attained this ripe old age was supposed to recognize his mortality and consider any extra years he might have as a special bonus to be valued and used with care.

But to get back to *yakudoshi*, even if the numbers are not quite certain, Japan is today at its own *yakudoshi*, 42 years having elapsed since the end of World War II.

At the war's end, Japan had to start over. Everything was lost, the nation was devastated, and even food was in very short supply. Japan was reborn, naked like every other newborn, but with a peace Constitution that the people could be proud of. Eventually, the Allied Occupation ended and Japan, even though it was characterized by General MacArthur as having the mentality of a 12-year-old, regained its place in the international community.

At the time of the war's end, I myself was 12 years old. Until then, I had heard from my teachers at school about the Anglo-American devils, how Western liberalism was a philosophy that led to chaos and corrupted people, and all the other horror stories.

But with defeat, my teachers did an abrupt about-face. Suddenly, America was the promised land. Liberalism and democracy were the only way to live.

I was, to say the least, surprised at this turn of events. And it engendered in me a profound distrust of adult hypocrisy. The change was so abrupt that I did not know what to believe. Had my teachers been ly-

ing before, or were they lying now? Even as a boy of 12, I knew that both could not be true. Somebody was lying, and I promised myself I would never become a perfidious adult like that.

Now I am an adult—55 years old—but I hope I am not that kind of an adult.

Since I had two brothers who were much older than I was—one by ten years and the other by seven—I was used to hearing things that were adult beyond my years. It was nothing much, now that I look back on it, just things like "this damned war" and "wouldn't it be nice to be able to say what you thought." But at the time, it was very daring.

## A child at play

Even as a child, I played the xylophone, and I used to practice between air raids. At the time, non-Axis music was looked down upon as enemy music, and there was a ban on American music.

But as a child, I had difficulty distinguishing between German and Italian music and the barbarian Anglo-American music. So I just played what I liked. In fact, *American Patrol* and *The Stars and Stripes Forever* were among my favorites. But when I played these at home, the neighborhood children—and probably some of the adults too—threw stones at the house and cursed me as a traitor.

Still, my father made no move to stop me playing what I liked.

Near the end of the war, our house was burned down in an air raid. Even when the B-29 raids had become almost daily occurrences and the rest of Tokyo was reduced to ashes, our neighborhood had miraculously escaped the flames. But one day an incendiary bomb fell right on our house. This was the last of the great air raids on Tokyo—the day the Americans ran out of places to burn down.

With every air raid, we joined our neighbors in the basement of the three-story kindergarten across the street from my house. When the B-29s were about

## Settling down

The reason for setting 42 as *yakudoshi* is that it is a time of change in the male body. It is, so to speak, the male menopause. When a man gets to be 42, he has to quit relying on brute strength and start using his wits. He has to depend on brain rather than brawn. He has to find shortcuts and start pampering himself. It is a time of change. It is a time when things start going wrong.

Today, the Japanese life expectancy is much longer than it used to be. The average life expectancy of men is about 75 or so. Just a hundred years ago, people spoke of the twoscore and ten years of life. Now it is more than threescore and ten. Logically, the *yakudoshi* should probably change too. But there is no change in the need to pay more attention to your physical frailty after the age of 40.

Another phrase that is used to describe the age of 40 is *fuwaku no toshi*—"the settling-down age." After 40, a person should know what he wants to do and settle down to doing it.

And 50 is referred to as *chimei*. When





200 km from Tokyo, the air raid alert siren went off. And when they were about 50 km away and it was sure they were headed for Tokyo, the real air raid alarm went off. I suspect the same was true in every Japanese city at the time. Even today, no matter where in the world I am, I reflexively tense up at the sound of a siren, and this is something that I probably never will get over.

The time we were burned out, the alarm went off only two or three minutes after the alert. It was a major fleet of B-29s, but they probably came in at a low altitude and the lousy Japanese radar hadn't sighted them.

Usually, we had ten minutes or so from the time the air raid alert went off until the enemy bombers were visible, so we were used to just casually ambling across the street to the kindergarten. But this time the wail of the alarms was punctuated by the noise of falling bombs as they cut through the air with an ear-splitting whine. Instinctively, I threw myself down at the side of the road as three incendiaries fell what seemed only about a meter away from where I lay. Somehow, I was not drenched with the napalm. It was pure luck, and I still get the shivers just thinking about what would have happened if one of them had hit me.

When I looked up, there were flames all around, and it was clear that there

would be no point in going to the kindergarten basement any more. With my parents, I ran off, away from the fires. But a new blaze sprang up right in front of us. So we started running in a different direction. And again flames. Like working our way through a maze, we ran along the narrow streets, running away from the fiery field behind us in search of safety. I do not know how many times we heard bombs falling and jumped into ditches to avoid getting hit.

The next morning, we made our way back to where our house had stood and found several hundred neighbors taking shelter in a ramshackle building that somehow still stood in a nearby botanical garden. And even many of them were more out than in.

There were still a couple of trains a day, and so, leaving my father behind because he still had work to do in Tokyo, my mother and I fought our way aboard one of these overcrowded trains and set off for my uncle's house in Kanazawa—a city on the Sea of Japan coast that had not been bombed yet—refugees throwing ourselves on his mercy.

Once we got to Kanazawa, I took the test to transfer to the local middle school. This was a school that had a reputation for providing a very spartan and military education—even more so than most in military-dominated Japan. During the in-

terview part of the entrance exam, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I knew the right answer was to say I wanted to be a general or an admiral, but for some reason I just blurted out that I wanted to be a musician. The next day, I am told, my father was called to the school and given a long lecture on what a disgrace I was and what kind of upbringing were they giving me anyway. But this I heard indirectly, and my father never said anything about it.

### Distrust of adults

Following the war, as I watched the teachers ignobly change their sermons, I was nonetheless thrilled to hear them say that "from now on, Japan should contribute to the world with its culture." My dream of becoming a musician took on new power.

Telling myself that Japan was renouncing military force, I decided that the country would not need any more soldiers and that I would soldier for Japanese culture. I hope the reader will understand the distinction between being a soldier and soldiering. To pubescent me, soldiering meant serving in the cause of culture.

Happily, I was able to become a musician, and music has taken me around the world for over 30 years.

Yet I still have this feeling of being lied to again. Even though they said Japan would not maintain any war potential, it has what is a sizable military force by any standard. I guess I never will get over my distrust of adults. ■

(This is the first of a series of essays by Mr. Iwaki.)

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