

In Favor of Forgetfulness

By Hiroyuki Iwaki

One of the attractions of every old European town is the *kellar*. Typically situated in the middle of town, usually in the basement of some building rising majestically above the main public square like the old city hall, this is a place where you can eat and drink to your heart's content.

As you walk into the dimly lit *kellar* and observe the domed ceiling, the impression is one of a maze of gaping caves. On the walls are coats of arms, partially obscured by the heavy-hanging smoke and creating a very medieval mood. In one corner will be a group of Japanese tourists, their loud, celebrating voices at-esting to their enjoyment of Europe's festive atmosphere. The German-speaking types, not to be outdone by these interlopers, are equally boisterous, and the southern Europeans are even noisier. No matter what the nationality, all are alike here, and there is no worry of any type of friction—except if anyone should think it is the place for a quiet rendezvous of a romantic nature.

Baffling behavior

Yet despite the camaraderie, I always feel a bit intimidated whenever I enter one of these *kellars*. Perhaps it is the poor ventilation and the dungeon-like stench that assails my sense of smell. Perhaps it is the din. Perhaps. But I suspect it is really the feeling I get of some drunken party that has been continuing uninterrupted since the Stone Age. And this thought causes me to tense up and to cower so that I cannot enjoy myself in this European setting. As I look at the rough-hewn faces around me, I realize that they are the direct descendants of people who roamed Europe hundreds of thousands of years ago—living in stone abodes, using stone tools to slay wild beasts, and then tearing at the flesh with their powerful teeth. They seem to reek of their flesh-eating heritage, and—myself the descendent of a largely herbivorous race—I feel strangely out of place.



Europe has a great number of intermingled peoples and languages. As you look out of your train window, the language of the area changes as often as the beautiful scenery does. Since the beginning of history, this commingling has meant a continuous succession of wars—whether between religious factions or among other vested interests. And these same aeons that have seen countless innocents massacred have seen people spend hundreds of years building a great cathedral. It seems to be such contradictory behavior, and I doubt if I will ever understand the Europeans. And this is true in spite of the fact that I have probably spent 20 of the last 30 years of my life there.

Since I have never frequented the Arab countries or Africa, I cannot really comment on those cultures, but the countries that were populated by immigrants from Europe—such as the United States, Canada and Australia—are all in the same “European” category as far as I am concerned, and they all have the same culture. Whether it is hamburgers or meat pies, it is the same basic image of Stone Age man roasting game over the fire. I get the same feeling even when I go to China or Korea. These are basically carnivorous people living in caves and other stone homes.

But then there is Japan, where the people are content to subsist serenely on steamed rice and steeped tea, and where

no one lives in stone houses built hundreds of years ago.

Japan does have many beautiful structures built long ago, but these are either buildings that people took special pains to preserve or structures that have survived by accident and are near collapse. They are totally unlike the stone dwellings built to survive all but the harshest abuses of war. From the earliest years, Japanese homes have been built of wood, and it was only later that the elegance of paper was added. So what if your home is destroyed in one of the frequent earthquakes or typhoons. So what if it burns to the ground. You can always build another one. The throwaway home—instant housing—has existed from the very beginning of Japanese history.

Faint footnotes

Another reason for having this type of architecture is that Japan is for the most part located in a temperate climate. It is neither too hot nor too cold, and the less substantial structures mandated by frequent natural disasters are still sufficient to protect people from the elements. Ceremoniously rebuilt every 20 years since the late 7th century, the Grand Shrine at Ise is an unwitting symbol of this ephemeral Japanese style of construction. Considering the way things quickly rot and get mildew on them in Japan's very humid climate, rebuilding the Ise Shrine was probably a very good idea.

Moreover, the legitimacy of the Ise Shrine's hold on our subconscious is buttressed by its identification with the Imperial myth of Japanese emperors descending from the gods in an unbroken lineage of over 2,600 years. Both the architecture and the tradition have combined to produce a nation of people with very short historical memories. Like the Ise Shrine itself, our recollections of the past have only 20-year life spans.

As the saying "*junen hito-mukashi*" indicates, 10 years ago is ancient history in Japan. Even so, we seem to be able to remember things that happened 10 years ago, and 20 seems to be the outside limit on our memories. What were some of the big stories? The furor over the Security Treaty. Michiko Kamba's death. The assassination of Inejiro Asanuma. And was it also about this time that the first *Shinkansen* went into service? When you think about it, all of these things that seemed so important at the time are but faint footnotes in our minds now. Yes, 20 years is a long time to remember.

As I have conducted around the world, I have been constantly impressed by the way other people are able to remember—or perhaps I should say are able to not forget—the past. This is a difference not so much in their actual ability to remember as in the determination not to forget. By comparison, the Japanese propensity is to want to forget.

This was brought home to me back in the early 1970s, when I was conducting in the Hague. Typically, I do not remember exactly what day it was, but it was a late April concert commemorating the queen's birthday. Before the general rehearsal on the morning of the concert, the orchestra manager came to my room. "We've gotten a lot of letters on tonight's concert," he said. "Oh," I said, "fan letters? Isn't that nice." "Well, they're not exactly fan letters."

Most of the letters had the same general message. It was all very well and fine for me to conduct the orchestra under normal circumstances, but I had to be replaced on the queen's birthday. They just could not accept the idea of having someone from a former enemy conducting the queen's concert. The manager said he

had answered each letter personally, explaining that although I was a Japanese national, I had been but a child during the war and there was no reason to bar me from conducting the orchestra that night. Happily, the concert proved uneventful.

The next concert was held on May 5, if I remember correctly, the day that is celebrated in Holland as National Liberation Day. This time, there were a number of small demonstrations protesting my conducting, but the orchestra manager again insisted on keeping me as conductor. As a precaution, however, he assigned bodyguards to protect me. Carefree Japanese that I was, this was the first time I had run up against the strong anti-Japanese sentiment in Holland. I knew, of course, that Indonesia was a Dutch colony and that many of the people who had built estates there lost everything they had to the invading Japanese in World War II and suffered horribly as internees and prisoners of war, but this was the first time I had realized that these people still harbored extremely bitter feelings toward Japan.

Altered attitude

Whatever the reasons for the war, there was suffering aplenty on both sides. Millions of soldiers died in the war, and Japan was totally and utterly defeated by the allied forces, especially the United States. Not only were Hiroshima and Nagasaki leveled with nuclear bombs of unprecedented ferocity, but also nearly every major Japanese city was subjected to repeated firebombing. Hundreds of thousands of noncombatants were killed in Tokyo alone. My own mother spent months constantly on the run from the fire and incendiary bombs, and the strain of it all ultimately resulted in her death.

After the war, Japan moved with mind-boggling alacrity to do a complete about-face in its attitude toward the former enemy and to embrace the United States as a respected and valued friend. Even though it centers in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese antinuclear movement is fundamentally motivated by horror at the threat that nuclear weapons pose to all life and revulsion at an international political situation—particularly Imperial Japanese militarism—that would cause a

nation to use such weapons. Nowhere does the movement feed on any hatred of the United States for having used the bomb in the war.

As Japan lay in ruins after the war, it was able to get back on its feet thanks to generous American assistance, and now, 40 years later, Japanese industry has recovered to the point where it threatens America's economic dominance.

Although I have only mentioned my mother, I am sure every Japanese has similar tales to tell. But if all the relatives of the people killed by the American forces had held a grudge against America, there is no way Japan could have achieved its present prosperity. I respect the way the people in the Middle East have passed their traditions and tribal memories on from generation to generation for nearly 2,000 years, and I would be the first to acknowledge the importance of Japan's never forgetting its accountability for the atrocities committed by Japanese militarism and the suffering caused other countries. I know the Japanese military killed innumerable enemy soldiers as well as civilians, just as I know that millions of Japanese also died.

I know all of these things, and I know how important it is that we not forget the lessons of history. But do we need to remember the hatred as well? When I look at the Japanese and their penchant for forgetting and juxtapose that against the eternal retention of bitter vendettas such as the never-ending war between Israel and the Palestinians and their supporters, I cannot help but wonder if there is not something to be said for forgetfulness. ■

(This is the second of six essays to be written by Mr. Iwaki.)

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