

First Encounters

By Takao Okamura

There was only one interviewer, a middle-aged nisei who looked at me with a scowl and then asked very slowly, "What is your name?"

"My name is Takao Okamura, sir."

"Are you a student at Waseda University?"

"Yes, I am, sir."

"You're hired."

That's all there was to it. Before I knew it, I was a special-hire interpreter for the Occupation Forces.

It was still in the very early 1950s, just half a dozen years after Japan had lost its gamble. It was a good 40 years ago, but the memory is still fresh in my mind.

At the time, I was a college student studying journalism at Waseda. I had studied hard to get into Waseda because I hoped that it would put me on the fast track to a good career, and now I was in and free of the grind and wanted to enjoy myself a little.

Japanese high school students are among the best in the world; university students among the worst. Every Taro, Daisuke and Hanako wants to get into college, so everyone studies as hard as he or she can for the college entrance exams. Even people who don't particularly care one way or the other are pushed by the force of social expectations to go to college, which means that they join in the competition and help create a nation of hard-studiers. But once we get in, there is lots of time for finding ourselves and social bonding.

Then as now, the university, like all universities in Japan, was very tolerant of students who paid more attention to their extracurricular activities than they did to their coursework, so I had the time. What I did not have was the money. And I figured that if I was going to get a part-time job anyway, it should at least be one where I could practice my English. So I decided to kill two birds with one stone and be an interpreter for the Occupation.

After a lot of looking around, I finally found an opening with the 71st Signal



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Service Battalion, which had taken over the old Imperial Army Azabu 3rd Regiment facilities in Roppongi. Since I was employed as a night-duty interpreter, I figured I could go to classes when I wanted to during the day and earn a little money practicing my English at night.

Such is not to say that my English was all that good. Except for a few months as a taxi dispatcher near Tokyo Station—a job I had gotten solely on the strength of my being a Waseda student and a job where I was taking GIs right off the plane who didn't have the slightest sense of Tokyo geography and putting them in cabs with cabbies who didn't speak a word of English—I did not have any special experience or expertise with English.

Occupation interpreter

Instead, I took the interpreter's test, if it can be called that, because the money looked good and I figured it never hurts to try. The worst they could do is not hire me. It was only later that I found out that the nisei who interviewed me had a nephew who was going to be trying for Waseda the next year and he figured it would not hurt to have a Waseda student

on the payroll. Both of us—interviewer and interviewee—were rather "so-what" about it. Then as now, the very fact of being a university student was enough to open a lot of doors.

When I was working as a dispatcher, I met a lot of smooth-talking pimps and con men working the streets of Tokyo. I also met a lot of GIs just in from the Korean front who only wanted two things: sex and liquor. Not surprisingly, the north side of Tokyo Station where I was working was a meeting ground for these people, and the Tokyo black market dealers were there in force to buy American cigarettes and booze from the GIs, to change their money for them, and to set them up with a little entertainment. Standing there in my Waseda uniform, I was very much out of place and out of my element.

All the Japanese knew at a glance that I was a student, and they would come up to me with, "Hey, Bookworm. Wanna make a deal?" And then they would ask me to steer GIs wanting a little sex, GIs wanting to change their military scrip into something they could use for a night on the town, or GIs just wanting to sell some PX Lucky Strikes or Canadian Club their way.

And once they came to trust me, I had black market racketeers pressing enormous sums of money on me and telling me to pick up some dollars, some cartons of Luckies, or some cases of Canadian Club for them—contraband that they then took off to sell at a markup God only knows where.

At the time, \$100 in military scrip was ¥36,000 at the official rate but ¥40,000 on the street. Which means that I was making more than 10% on every deal. One carton of Luckies was a dollar. This was ¥360 at the official rate. But the market was buying from me at 10 cartons for ¥4,000—again, a more than 10 percent profit. Canadian Club was even more lucrative, since I could get it for ¥360 a fifth and then sell it for over ¥5,000 a dozen.

Just standing there at the taxi stand, I was an automatic intermediary between the GIs with things to sell and the black marketeers who wanted to buy. I was considered an honest broker who could ease their linguistic difficulties and help them make a deal—all for a price, of course.

At the time, the average Japanese worker was only earning ¥5,000 to ¥6,000 a month, and here was this Waseda student making that much on a single deal. Personally, I suspect that the Occupation authorities were well aware of this situation but ignored it because it was convenient for the troops who were taking things from the PX and selling them on Tokyo street corners. In fact, there were a number of GIs who were active retailers on the black market, selling contraband dollars, bootleg cigarettes and tax-free liquor to build their own nest eggs. Saying that they would be court-martialed if anybody found out about this, they brought all kinds of things to me.

One person even said he had a boxcar of sugar he wanted me to find a buyer for. And these people were not particularly furtive about it. They certainly were not shy about what they were doing. Rather than asking me if I could find a buyer, they figured I was in it for the money too and perfunctorily ordered me, "Hey, kid. Put me in touch with somebody."

It was a world of fast money and faster talk—not the sort of thing I wanted to be doing the rest of my life—and so I quit after just four months on the job.

My mother, who had been born around the turn of the century and had graduated from Tokyo Woman's Christian University in English literature, had a job as a translator for the CIA in Tokyo. Japan had just spent a long four and a half years in a losing battle against the bloody Brits and the yahoo Yanks—both of whom used English—and her English abilities were suddenly turned from treason to treasure.

She was an educated woman who was ahead of her time, and decided that we should all learn English. She invited her friends from among the American military establishment to our home and gave us—me, my brothers, our relatives and

even neighborhood kids—a basic grounding in this alien language. She set these sessions up by inviting someone for dinner, which meant that it only cost us the cost of the meal.

As might be expected, we had a succession of different teachers. But, working for the CIA as they did, they were all very sharp people. They knew full well that they were being exploited for English lessons, but they found my mother persuasive and saw it as a chance to visit a real Japanese home and try some Japanese home cooking. We lived in a typical Japanese house—a little wooden thing with just the fringes of a yard—and I am sure that they went away thinking of Japan as an underdeveloped and impoverished country not at all like the rich and powerful United States.

Prewar generation

After all, they had to talk to a bunch of children who were not only English-illiterate but did not even have any conversational skills, they relieved themselves in what was basically an indoor latrine, and they ate (not with chopsticks like the rest of us but with forks) from the fish-and-vegetable soup that my mother had somehow managed to throw together from what she could find despite the food shortage.

Not having any understanding of our prewar and wartime education that Japan was the land of the gods, that the glorious Imperial lineage had existed from time immemorial, and that a divine wind would surely come down just as it did against the Mongols in the late 13th century to wreak vengeance upon our enemies and protect us from harm, they were no doubt astonished that such a pittance of a country had dared challenge the mighty United States. I am sure it struck them as more than a little absurd.

My father had also been born around the turn of the century, and he too had studied something foreign in college—English law at the University of Tokyo. But unlike my mother, he had no interest whatsoever in learning English. In fact, he was more than apathetic about English. He was downright antipathetic

toward what he called "the red-haired barbarians." If my mother were still alive, she would be 84, but my father was seven years her senior—and very typical of the older generation of Japanese.

Yet even my father was curious about the strange creatures that my mother brought to our house. He never came into the room with us, but he would find some excuse to go out into the yard and peer in intently at the barbarians trying to teach us their strange tongue.

This was the first time that there had ever been any sizable numbers of foreigners in Japan, and different people interacted in different ways. There were hookers looking proud of themselves as they clung to the tall GIs, there were girls (called "onlies") who did not have to find a new bed every night but had latched on to one particular person for the duration, there were pimps, con men, and black marketeers living on the fringes of society, there were people like my mother and myself who were using our English to make a living, there were people like my father who were both attracted and repelled by the whole situation, and there were many, many more Japanese who were experiencing their first encounters with the American presence—as well as the vast majority of Japanese who looked on in bewilderment, not knowing what was to become of themselves or of Japan.

Since then, of course, I have graduated from brokering at the taxi stand and am now an opera singer who has lived in Europe for more than 20 years. Yet my story is not all that different from the stories of many other Japanese, and I hope you will indulge me while I reminisce and speculate over the next four installments. ■

(This is the first of five essays by Takao Okamura.)

Takao Okamura, one of Japan's most popular opera singers, studied in Europe, won international concours, and then had 20-year stage career there up to 1979.