

Childhood Memories

By Atsuko Azuma

My most vivid memories of early childhood involve my placement in nursery school. I was not yet three, and my mother had just given birth to my little brother.

I had first started walking when I was one and a half. My parents, apparently delighted to see their first child toddling about, seem to have walked me around a bit too much—I caught some virus that went to my leg and infected the bone tissue. My mother was told that my left leg would have to be amputated and, fearing the worst, stayed by me day and night. As it turned out, the doctors were able to save my leg. The wound healed, but I had become a frail, timid child, and followed my mother wherever she went.

For such a child, being placed in nursery school is a terrible shock. Desperately missing my mother, I cried all day long. The teachers didn't know what to do with me. The Senri Grace Kindergarten, as it was called, was a missionary school run by a Mr. Hora, a kind man who had recently returned from a period of study in the United States. He and his wife, Seki, seemed to take a special pity on this bawling child.

Days before air raids

Set on top of a large hill near Osaka, the Senri Grace Kindergarten was a beautiful place, a stylish building surrounded by colorful flower gardens. To the young mothers of the neighborhood, it was the nursery school of choice.

To take my mind off my sorrows, Seki gently took me by the hand and led me around the grounds. She showed me the flowers in the garden, the carp in the pond. I had been crying for so long that I no longer had any tears—all I could do was gulp in air and sob. I can still remember the warmth of her hand and the softness of her velvet dress.

Every morning was the same tearful parting. Yet, thinking back, perhaps it was all this crying that gave me the



Atsuko Azuma playing in *Pagliacci* at the Staatsoper in Vienna.

lung capacity to become an opera singer.

As I got used to nursery school, I found a new joy in life—singing and dancing. When I would get home, my mother would play children's songs on a windup record player as I sang and danced along. I was so excited when it came time for our Christmas play at the nursery school. Garbed in a veil made from a curtain and wearing a star-shaped golden paper crown, I played the part of a princess.

By the time I graduated from nursery school, my mother had already led me through the rudiments of the piano with the Beyer Manual. She then went out and hired a real piano teacher to come and give us lessons at our house. I was not as serious a student as I could have been—if it started to thunder out, I would get scared and ask my teacher to end the lesson. But when I did feel like playing the piano, I would get very absorbed, sitting there in my underwear and sweating away as I practiced my lessons.

My little brothers and my father also took piano lessons. My father ran a company that made bodies for *Kamikaze* airplanes. Although we had regularly played

duets on the piano, work began to take more and more of his time until he had none left for the piano anymore.

One memory I have around this time is practicing with my piano teacher in our living room as American bombers, B-29s, rumbled overhead. I was still only six or seven years old and, even though all was peaceful in our home, yet I still could feel that something terrible was going on in the bigger world. Every morning, book bag on my back and air-raid hood in my hand, I would leave home for an elementary school.

One morning, the air-raid sirens went off just as we opened our books for class. Soon the school bells joined in the din; we were told to put on our air-raid hoods and hurry home. On my way back, incendiary bombs came sputtering down on me. I jumped into a ditch and stayed there until the enemy planes disappeared. Then, as though nothing much had happened, I continued on my way. A bomb had landed next to one pillar of an ivy-covered gate. At that site alone, the ivy was burned and wilted. It looked so sad.

At home, the piano teacher was excitedly talking in a loud voice. Her name was Ryo Ushiya, a graduate of the teacher's college in Ueno and an understudy of the world-famous prima donna Tamaki Miura. She always wore a kimono, bundled her hair in back, and spoke in a loud yet rich voice—to us, she seemed a sort of grandmother. Yet, as the air raids got worse, our lessons became less and less frequent. Finally, Ryo stopped coming altogether.

As part of a government policy to disperse the population and protect schoolchildren from air raids, our family was moved from Ikeda to a mountainous area in Minou, overlooking Osaka. There were five children in our family, and none of us were able to go to school anymore. Those were happy times—we spent our days playing in a nearby stream, trying to catch fish. We were staying in an outbuilding of a traditional *ryokan* inn called the Koto-

noya. The manager was a touchy character who did not take kindly to little girls who walked around on her veranda and *tatami* mats with wet feet.

Flames of war

We eventually found a suitable house near Minou Station and moved there. It was late afternoon one day when my little brother, high up in a tree, called down for me to climb up and join him—"The sunset over Osaka is very pretty." Being somewhat of a tomboy, I shimmied up the tree to where my brother was waiting and watched the sunset. But as the sun went down, we watched as the beautiful glow transformed into tongues of flame—Osaka was burning.

About three hours later, a large group of stragglers, faces and arms blackened with soot, came walking up to our house to ask for food. They told us that they had been burned out of their factory in the air raid and had been walking all the way from there. A few days later, we huddled around the radio to listen to the emperor's announcement that Japan had lost the war.

Those were trying times. In the streets, wounded soldiers—many with missing limbs—played the accordion or harmonica for a little spare change.

As the manager of a factory producing military supplies, my father was allowed to own a car. One day he returned home unexpectedly early. Because he had been extremely busy with work, us children had rarely had the chance to talk with him anymore. He looked very tired, and we rushed over to ask what was the matter. He told us that he had walked home—an American MP stopped him in his car, told him to get out and confiscated it right there. He said he wasn't feeling well and went straight to bed.

He must have felt as if his world was falling apart. Because he was a non-resident landowner, the government had also confiscated a great amount of agricultural land from him. The next morning we were called to our father's bedside. Lying on his side and covered in thick blankets, he watched us as we apprehensively entered the room.

"Everything is gone—I no longer have anything I can leave to you. But even if I have to work as a day laborer, I'm going to see that you at least get an education. You must promise that from now on you will study hard." He then pulled the covers over his head and began to weep. It was the first and last time that we had ever seen our father cry.

Having been cut off from all government assistance, and the factory itself

having been burned to ashes by air raids, he tried to make shift by selling his private properties. He sold off our furniture—our grand piano went, followed by two upright pianos—just to make ends meet. Our promise to our father fresh in our minds, the five of us pulled together and studied hard. "Possessions can be taken away," he told us, "But no one can ever take an education away from you."

Around this time American soldiers were busy spraying DDT on people and buildings around the country, which, being immediately after the war, was still quite insanitary. Two soldiers entered our house. They walked into our drawing room, a very nice room furnished with a Groterian Steinweg's upright piano we had somehow managed to keep, and said that they wanted to eat their lunch there. They were the first Westerners I had ever seen—such big noses!—but I wasn't afraid of them. When they finished eating, I went out and played *Suwannee River* for them on the piano. They suddenly began to weep. The song must have reminded them of home.

Seeing how strongly music can affect people, I began studying the piano with renewed diligence. Eventually I entered the Kobe College Junior School, whereupon my parents sold our house and moved to a smaller place in Takarazuka.

There was and is a girls' opera troupe in Takarazuka, and, enchanted by a star of the troupe who played only male roles, I went there nearly every month to watch. At just that time the *Takarazuka Shimbun* newspaper was holding a choral competition. My teachers urged me to participate. I won first prize, and the judges praised me and encouraged me to continue my studies. It seems that the muse of song had finally noticed me—at that point my destiny changed, my life took a turn for the better. ■

(This is the first of six essays by Atsuko Azuma.)

Atsuko Azuma made her debut as an opera singer at the Reggio Emilia Municipal Theater in 1963, and then had a 20-year stage career as a prima donna in Berlin, Vienna, New York, Munich, Hamburg, Buenos Aires, Moscow, etc.



Photo: Mainichi Shimbun

Devastation in Kobe after a raid by American B-29 bombers toward the close of the Pacific War.