**“Seventeen Years in Shenyang” (1954, excerpt)**

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But, as I mentioned earlier, the reason I don’t feel comfortable acknowledging Shenyang as my birthplace is, simply put, we Japanese people lived there as the dominant people of the colony. This fact seldom existed in my consciousness then. But reality and consciousness are different. One characteristic of the dominant people is, as is also demonstrated among the Americans in Japan now, that they do not see the people of that land as people, but rather as plants or rocks. In other words, the people of the land become part of the landscape. Even if you don’t feel you live that way, this fact does not change much. It makes you lose sight of not only those people, but also yourself, but the problem is that people seldom realize what is happening. This is why a colony can never be a homeland.

Luckily, my father moved to Shenyang in the early 1920s, when Japan had not yet established its dominance there. He went to Shenyang out of something like a pioneer spirit that he inherited from my grandpa. I like people from Hokkaido because they have a strong pioneer spirit. But reclamation in nature and reclamation in a colony are as different as heaven and earth. Those rogues called “continental drifters” mostly practiced the latter, doing nothing but contaminate the pioneer spirit with horrible stigma. For me, the fact that my father was a pure scientist and not the continental drifter type was a piece of fortune amid misfortune. Most importantly, I have been trying to change even the misfortunate part into fortune….

I heard that the only thing my father brought with him to Shenyang was a car. At the time, all the Japanese lived in the vicinity of the only two large buildings in the area, the Yamato Hotel and the South Manchurian Medical Institute. I also remember taking pictures around the so-called Yayoi Street in a rickshaw with a strange hat on my head that looked like half of a boiled egg. Our home must have been somewhere around there. It was a two-story brick building with a *pechka* [a Russian stove]. That was more than five years after my father moved to Shenyang. I was born when my father came to Tokyo to study occasionally. According to my father’s diary, by then he was living in a Russian family’s house.

After that, we lived at 26 Aoi Street, located at the northeast corner of the Japanese street, also in Shenyang city. It was a one-story brick house, without a *pechka*, but with a hot water boiler. I’m not just calling it a “corner”—the house really was located on a corner. There was not a single house on the east or south side of our house. Because new houses soon started to rise up on the south side, I cannot remember too clearly what used to lie to the south of our house. But on the east side was a deserted area. There was a large ditch with a dike about three hundred meters from our house; beyond it, as far as one could see, there were sorghum fields, a brick yard, and even more deserted areas. After the Manchurian Incident, the Chinese continued to carry out resistance activities, and a flying bullet once passed by my mother as she entered the front yard of our house. It was really a bizarre thing. We used to call those people bandits and compared them to wolves, and detested and feared them from deep in our hearts. Ignorance is funny, but is also criminal. In particular, I’m not sure how my parents felt about all this. They were conscientious people, but were not particularly courageous, and so even if they knew what was going on, they would not have wanted to speak up.

Beyond the dike, the ditch rose up and turned to the south while converging with other ditches extending from the city; it then turned to the west, passing by the northern end of a sand dune named “Sand Hill” towards the railway, but then turning around at the embankment and flowing further south until it merged with the river called Hun River. During the rainy season, the river could flood hundreds of square meters and cut through the dike. Between the dike and the Hun River, one could see peanut fields, beyond which were sparse bushes, beyond which were poor Chinese peasants’ clay houses that had to be rebuilt every year after being washed out by the flood. Lively black pigs ran around, and naked children played with the pigs. Peanuts grow well in sandy soil, but it was probably too dry here for them to grow well. People used something like a honey bucket to fetch water and watered the field with a ladle as they walked around. The field was so wide that it felt as if they spent all their time walking in the field all year long. Only the area where the dike and the railway intersected was wet in an unpleasant way, with a dump field and hundreds of glass bottles, and even our naughty kids found it hard to approach. I remember seeing a decapitated head, likely belonging to a bandit, that was hung on the top of a standing stick together with a notice of charges. The face was swollen and pale and worms were coming out of the eyes.

Here and there I would find the dead bodies of newborn babies. When we were playing hide-and-seek at Sand Hill – although going to places like that was strictly forbidden by our parents at the time – I hid at the root of a bush and was feeling smug about the wonderful spot, when I suddenly saw a baby lying there quietly, its nose rotten and its body swollen like a balloon. The baby had lustrous and beautiful skin. But worms were coming out of a wound on the inside of its foot.

There is little to write about beyond that, but I did have numerous adventures on the other side of the dike. The fun I had on the other side of the dike was an absolute secret from my parents. People generally believed that bandits lived on the other side of the dike. Now that I think of it, the dike was probably the boundary of the extra-territorial rights.

On the empty ground east of our house, rickshaw boys, street vendors, monkey show performers and so on would rest, but in general it was a pleasant, sunny area. A food vendor would always stop by. The things he sold included steamed buns, scallions, miso, cooking oil…. Another frequent visitor was a young boy selling soup rice bowls, who always had a pot in a cotton wrap on one side of his shoulder, and a rice container on the other. These two people somehow detested each other and often got into quarrels. I enjoyed watching the quarrels together with other street vendors. The monkey show happened once per month, and only in summer. The show was just that there was a monkey, and involved no special skills or the like. The monkey was just rolling around a stick. Is it that a monkey in itself was special? Or was the target of the show only the nostalgic Japanese, and there was no tradition of monkey shows in China?

Was it because most houses were built with bricks and had double-paned windows? Street vendors all shouted loudly with characteristic sounds. The oil vendor scraped the bamboo tube tied to his waist with a monotonous sound. The candy vendor was Korean and made a *chiang-chiang* sound with a pair of scissors thirty centimeters long. The tofu vendor blew a trumpet and seemed to be imitating the Japanese. There was another person who held something like a pair of tongs, put a stick between the two blades, and suddenly cut into the stick with an exaggerated sound, but I can’t remember clearly what vendor the person was. Maybe it was a fortune teller. When they called, their voices were not like those of the Japanese vendors but were so rich that they reverberated, much like an opera singer singing. The bakery was run by a Russian, the candy vendor was a Korean, and all of the other vendors were Chinese. They spoke Japanese with us, but sometimes made strange mistakes. There was a knife sharpener who said razors and kissors, which did not make sense, so I listened more carefully and realized he was trying to say “scissors.” Similarly, a small goods vendor who often visited our house once asked my mother if she would like to buy some lice, which shocked my mother. It turned out by “lice” (*shirami*) he actually meant “walnut” (*kurumi*). He first asked a Japanese person and learned that a walnut was called *kurumi*, then remembered it as *kuromi*, and because *kuro* means black and *shiro* means white in Japanese, he confused *kuro* and *shiro* and eventually made it *shirami*. The vendor himself also laughed and murmured *shirokuro*, *shirokuro* repeatedly.

One special thing was the puppet show that came with someone beating a gong. He had something like a willow-wrapped backpack on his shoulder, covered in a black cloth, and then opened it to be the stage. He squatted on the ground, raised the stage on top of his head, and then let the cloth drop, so that he would be hidden under the stage. I did not understand what the show was about. Basically it was a sword fight that went on and on. Even someone like me who easily got hooked by things would leave eventually. It seemed that other kids were leaving too (partly because they could not understand the talking). Perhaps because he was rather upset that no one gave him money, he stopped coming after two or three times.

The more impressive shows were the magic shows. They were mostly simple shows by one or two people, but once a big show came with five people. One show that even today I still cannot understand was that they would put a bowl of water on the ground and cover it with a towel, and as the man jumped, the towel would be blown up and the bowl would disappear. He would open the towel to show that the bowl had indeed disappeared, and this time stretch the center of the towel to loosen it up, before again holding his breath and removing the towel to reveal that the bowl had now come back. The bowl was full of water, and there were even goldfish swimming in it. Afterward there would be the routine show of knife-eating. That was a rather poor show and could be easily seen through. It was called a knife but was actually a soft spring. He would put it in his mouth and roll it in little by little. But he would then choke with tears, as if it were a really painful show, and walk around the audience to ask for money, a spectacle that could hardly be borne. Most people would be horrified and would bring out money immediately. He would not return without collecting all the money, and so in the interim another man would come up and appear to start preparing for something even more interesting. But as soon as they’d collected all the money, the man would stop immediately. After the show, we would find the spot where the bowl was placed and look around. The ground was normal, and there were no traces of special treatment. I remember I was so troubled by the trick that I felt pain in my chest. That was a magic show that I cannot understand to this day.

The city of Shenyang developed fast. It expanded in all directions year by year at an unbelievable speed.

There was a smart Korean guy who came to Shenyang with a hundred *yen* and bought a piece of land in a suburb. The next year, land prices increased by many times, and the South Manchuria Railway Company bought his land. The guy used the money to buy even more land, and the next year the South Manchuria Railway Company bought the land again. In this way, ten years after he moved there, he was able to build a house in Shenyang. It was a four-story house with a greenhouse attached to the south side.

It was said that his house was twice as big as the house of the vice president of the South Manchuria Railway Company. But about two years before the end of the war, he was stabbed to death by his young niece due to a property dispute. Around the end of the war, Shenyang was larger than London in size and had become a world city. By then, our family had moved to a more distant suburb, but our new house was still right at the center of the residential street, which was nice. The monkey show, the puppet show and the oil vendor no longer came, and the total number of vendors decreased by half. Instead, good-looking co-op stores were established on every block, and the looping city tram was also close to being finished. All the roads had been hardened with asphalt, and carriages without rubber tires were banned from entering the city. The west side of the railway, where before no one would go alone, was transformed into a huge industrial region. Most areas around the railway station were Japanese-only streets.

But what remained unchanged were the land-bound Chinese people and the street in the old city center. Actually, they did not remain unchanged—they changed for the worse. The street was the street of the defeated. Take the first-class department store in the old city center as an example. There was not even one customer. Whenever someone did enter, several shop assistants, led by their supervisor, would suddenly surround the customer and accompany him or her throughout the store. Of course this was not for the purpose of monitoring the customer. It was to show respect. But the customer would feel strange, as if the department store were open for just one person. The atmosphere would suddenly turn cold, and the customer’s shopping mood would disappear. What was prosperous were the open stalls and secondhand stores that gathered along the outside of the city wall like mold. You could see the true face of Shenyang only if you went here.

I liked the street of the defeated. But it was so conceited for me to feel as if it were a foreign country there.

This was a beloved land where I spent my entire life before coming of age. There are endless things from the period that I want to write about. But I’m reaching the page limit and will have to find other opportunities to continue.

The last thing I want to say, however, is that none of these things exist today. The liberation of China and the construction that followed have changed everything. Shenyang has been transformed into a surprisingly clean and modern industrial city. This fact moves me. Because of it, whenever I call Shenyang my birthplace, I feel deep shame.

I want to visit there again. However, I will not be someone who returns to an old place; I’ll be nothing more than a traveler from far away. That said, a third of my dreams unfold on the stage of Shenyang.

“Seventeen Years in Shenyang” ( 瀋陽十七年 “Shin’yō jūshichi nen,” 1954), in *Abe Kōbō zenshū* 4: 86-91.