

The Oral History of a Japanese Soldier in Manchuria

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Introduction

This is an excerpt from "[Return from Siberia: A Japanese Life in War and Peace, 1925-2015](#)". The book, which was published in May 2018, is based on a series of interviews with a Japanese man who was born in 1925 and served in the Japanese army before being interned in Siberia following Japan's surrender at the end of World War II. This excerpt describes his experience as a soldier in Manchuria and his journey to Siberia after being conscripted into the army in November 1944.

The Background of the Interview Project

The man, Oguma Kenji, is my own father. The interviews that formed the basis for this book were conducted between May 2013 and August 2014.

The project began in order to provide Hayashi Eiichi, a PhD candidate at the time, the opportunity to interview an old veteran. Mr. Hayashi was studying the history of Japanese soldiers who remained in Asian countries after World War II. When I began our interviews, I had no intention of publishing the results. However, I was struck by the fact that my father was an ideal interview subject for a historian. Not only were his recollections vivid, but his memories were not distorted by excessive emotion; he recounted what he had felt and observed quite honestly and without adornment. In addition, he kept many photos, letters, documents, and books concerning his family.

With the PhD candidate's permission, I continued to conduct interviews myself and eventually used them as the basis for this manuscript. As I visited my father regularly, the interviews were useful to avoid silence due to lack of topics to discuss with him. The first draft was written in the summer of 2014. My father checked the content of the manuscript and made corrections for accuracy without manipulating or embellishing the facts. Of course I also checked historical facts and context.

Each chapter was subsequently serialized in the Japanese journal *Sekai* from issue number 861 (October 2014) to 870 (June 2015), then published in book form in Japanese by Iwanami Publishers in June 2015. A Korean edition was published in commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the end of WWII in August 2015 by Dong-A Press and a Chinese edition (traditional orthography) in September 2015 by Lien-ching Press in Taiwan. A second Chinese edition (simplified orthography) was published in January 2017 in the People's Republic of China by Imaginist Press. The Korean TV broadcasting company MBC broadcast

a one hour documentary film “Father and Me” on August 15, 2016. This excerpt is drawn from the English edition published by International House of Japan in May 2018.

The Contents of the Book

The uniqueness of the book is that it provides the history of a common man who lived through the 20th century. Historians know a lot about the conception of the war from the perspective of the high command, the state, and the court. Sociologists and economists also know a great deal about economy, society and political and cultural discourses of the era. However, relatively little is known from the perspective, experience, and perception of soldiers and common people. Although there are some memoirs of men serving in the military, most were written by young officers or student soldiers with an educated middle-class or elite upbringing. Moreover, such memoirs are frequently colored by emotions and exaggeration. In contrast, Kenji, a graduate of a commerce school, is of modest class origins and his stance is conveyed honestly and without adornment.



Kenji was born in 1925 in the small town of Saroma in Hokkaido and was raised in a family that ran a small tempura shop in downtown Tokyo. His story started from memories of that time: how he had moved to Tokyo from his birthplace, Hokkaido, in the depression in the early 1930s, how his family kept fish for Tempura without electricity, how middle-class and lower class children were divided in his primary school, how his two brothers and a sister passed away due to tuberculosis, hard work and malnutrition. When he was conscripted in November 1944, nine months before Japan’s surrender, neighbors in Tokyo were already terrified of air raids and were indifferent to the enlistment of a youth. His grandfather wept at the departure of his only surviving grandchild. This is the contents of Chapter 1 of the book.

This excerpt, Chapter 2, depicts his life in the Japanese army and his journey to Siberia. Chapters 3 and 4 describe life in the labor camp in Siberia including malnutrition, hard labor, extreme cold of minus 40 degrees, deaths of his colleagues, and the communist re-education described as the “democratic movement.” Chapters 5 and 6 depict his hard time in the difficult economic situation after he returned to a bombed out Japan in 1948, including 12 job changes and 5 years in a tuberculosis sanatorium. He succeeded in opening a small sporting goods shop in the economic boom of the 1960s (Chapter 7 and 8) and was also involved in a wartime compensation lawsuit against the Japanese government (Chapter 9). He joined the lawsuit to help a former Korean-Chinese-Japanese soldier who met with Kenji in the labor camp in Siberia. The Korean lived in Manchuria and was conscripted to Japanese army in 1945, then gained Chinese nationality after he returned to his hometown from Siberia in 1948.

In this book I have attempted to portray the ups and downs of Kenji’s personal experience in the context of the history of East Asia—not only Japan, but the Soviet Union, China and Korea—that shaped his life. In addition, the book depicts not only his wartime experience, but his everyday life in prewar and postwar Japan. Since many war memoirs fail to include such information, we often learn little about the social background of the individual prior to the war, or the lives that survivors led after they returned home. Moreover, this book introduces a social science perspective. It considers contemporary economics, politics, and law while depicting, through the experience of a single individual, the conditions of social mobility, educational achievement, employment opportunities, and industrial structure

during the era.

The Common Sense of a Common Man

Most interesting from the perspective of an historian might be Kenji's common sense responses, which are rarely found in other narratives. For example, Kenji recalls his feeling at the time he was informed of Japan's defeat by officers in Manchuria. He says; "When they told us, I was upset; I hadn't thought that Japan could lose. But after about twenty minutes I thought to myself, 'Wait a minute. This means I can go home and see my family,' and that made me happy. You couldn't let that show, so I kept quiet about it, but I think everyone felt that way."

The typical narrative of Japanese conservatives is that Japanese people accepted the defeat with resentment. Some counter narratives claim that Japanese felt relieved by the end of war. However, Kenji's complicated feeling could not be categorized within either of these narratives. He was resentful at first, but felt relieved within minutes. However, putting aside preexisting narratives, the feeling can be understood as the common sense of human beings.



This common sense, which might seem at odds with many other narratives, can be found in many parts of the book. In Chapter 3, Kenji says that "After the end of the war in 1945 I'd used my Rising Sun flag as a carryall (furoshiki). I hadn't had room for anything other than survival" in Siberia. But in Chapter 4, when he got news of General Tōjō Hideki's failed suicide attempt and Tōjō's arrest by US Occupation forces in September 1945, Kenji recalls "when I heard that the general who had commanded us never to be taken prisoner had bungled his suicide and been taken prisoner himself, I was filled with scorn.... My feelings were all the stronger since I'd heard that Hitler had gone down fighting." Such an ideological morality became the basis for his accusation of the Emperor after he returned from Japan in 1948 in Chapter 5. "I'd been in the army, so I naturally felt that the emperor, as the supreme commander who had issued the declaration of war, ought to take responsibility for the defeat." His common sense led him to remain sympathetic toward his Korean-Chinese-Japanese fellow soldier who had filed suit against the Japanese government. In Chapter 9 Kenji's 1997 testimony before a Japanese court was this: "Here is my request to our country: My request for postwar compensation of this kind has no statute of limitations. Stop trying forever to evade responsibility. Cease burdening future generations with this negative legacy." His application was turned down, but Kenji says "A great many of my comrades were killed as a result of being drafted into a senseless war and then put to senseless labor...Maybe it was useless to say such things to the judges, but I decided to speak my mind in any case." He disliked communism because of his Siberian experience but he regularly voted for the Japan Socialist Party because he hated conservatives who refused to accept responsibility for the suffering of the people including his family.

I dare not classify or evaluate his actions and feelings within existing frameworks. What I tried to do was record the reality of the common people of that era through Kenji's memoir. I thought that was my role as a sociologist/historian, one that might open the way to dialogue between polarized narratives.

Reactions from Asian Countries

The book has attracted the attention of many readers in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and China. Posts from Chinese readers carried this book to No.7 among history/culture books in 2017 at China's Douban book review website. Some posts said that this is an interesting common man's history referring to the episode of his use of the rising sun flag. Some confessed that they changed their stereotypes of Japanese soldiers as typical villains portrayed in Chinese TV programs. Some showed regret at not having listened to the voices of their parents so that China would not have such an oral history of Chinese soldiers. Some praised Kenji's eloquent testimony in court even though he had little education. Some saw the value of learning about the majority of Japanese people who were not "Salarymen". Indeed, the majority of Japanese were not "Salarymen" in big corporations in 1960 when the college entrance rate was 10%, and regular workers in big corporations with over 500 employees have never exceeded 30% of the Japanese workforce.

The same goes for reactions in Taiwan and Korea. Some Taiwanese told me that Kenji's court testimony was touching. A young Taiwanese said that he sympathized with Kenji's unstable job history, which seemed to resemble that of the younger generation in Taiwan. Korea's MBC broadcasting network made a documentary film "Father and Me" which documented my journey to visit the former labor camp in Siberia and subsequently four cities for discussion with three Korean returnees from Siberian internment and one Korean whose father was a returnee from Siberia. The story of making the film is included in the English edition of the book.

In Japan, the book was reviewed by newspapers including *The Financial Times (Nikkei)*. I received a prize from a famous publishing company in 2015. Reactions from Japanese readers shown in Japanese book review websites were not very different from those of Chinese readers. Liberals praised Kenji's action in the lawsuit, conservatives evaluated highly his survival spirit in the war and living in poverty. Even rightists admitted that the book reflected the common sense of the Japanese people.

Of course, there were some criticisms. Korean newspaper The Dong A-Ilbo Online reviewed the book on August 15, 2015 and said; "We cannot unconditionally pardon Kenji just because he was an ordinary soldier. He would have killed his opponents to survive had he been sent into battle against the Chinese army or the Korean independence army." As described in the excerpt on Kenji's days in Manchuria, he did not have a gun due to lack of supplies and any opportunity to fight. However, I do not deny the possibility noted by Dong A-Ilbo.

Nevertheless, the Dong A-Ilbo review also said "aside from the fact that he was Japanese, you can read the book like a story of our parents and grandparents who lived a tumultuous modern history." The review concluded: "though it might be roundabout, peace comes from a common conscience that seems powerless."

I hope that you gain something from this excerpt and the book. My father will become 93 years old on October 30 in this year. He is still fine so far.



Postcard sent by Kenji to his father Yūji in February 1945. Army censorship permitted little more than stereotypical content. "I am training diligently night and day, so don't worry about me."

Chapter 2

In the Army

On 25 November 1944, Kenji presented himself at the headquarters of the Eighth Field Artillery Regiment in Tokyo for induction into the Imperial Japanese Army as a private second-class. Soon after his arrival, one of the veteran soldiers taking care of the new recruits told them, “You won’t be here long. You’re shipping out for Manchuria.”

The army was another world. After he changed into the officially issued military uniform, all personal clothing had to be returned to his family. The new recruits handed over their civilian clothing and reluctantly bid farewell to their families in the yard in front of the barracks. Kenji’s father Yūji and grandfather Ishichi had come to see him off. Ever since his stroke, Ishichi had been partially paralyzed on his right side. Kenji would never forget the image of him dragging his leg as he came to bid farewell to his grandson.

When his father heard that Kenji was bound for the much colder climate of Manchuria, he took off the vest he was wearing and tried to give it to Kenji. But Kenji, who had been instructed not to bring any items of civilian clothing, refused it. As he said his final farewells to his father and grandfather, Kenji nearly wept.

After several days in the barracks, on the morning of 3 December the recruits boarded a train at Shibuya Station, heading west. Four days previously, on 29 November, Tokyo had suffered its first night raid by US bombers.

1

The army transport train, with Kenji and several hundred other soldiers aboard, stopped briefly at Nagoya, where they were served hot tea by members of the Women’s National Defense Association. Passing through Kōbe in the middle of the night, they arrived at the port of Moji on the evening of 4 December. After waiting for several days in barracks, they were loaded onto a transport ship, sailing for Busan on the Korean peninsula on 8 December.

Once at sea, they assembled on deck for an address by an army cadet. This date, the anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the imperial declaration of war on the United States and Great Britain, was observed throughout the Japanese empire with such ceremonies—though this would be the last year to be marked in this way. Eight months later, on 15 August 1945, Japan would surrender to the Allied forces.

Kenji recalls: “The young cadet was our transport officer. I suppose they were pretty short on regular officers at that point. The seas were rough, and as the bow of the boat rose and fell with the waves, this young cadet, who was right in the bow, bobbed up and down so violently that he could barely stay on his feet as he delivered his lecture.” Arriving in Busan on the evening of 8 December, they spent several nights in a school on the west side of the harbor before embarking for Manchuria on a train equipped with passenger cars. Military trains stopped frequently en route to meet the demands of the transport timetables. After spending days in transit, during which they slept aboard the train, they arrived on 28 December or so at the quarters of the Seventeenth Signal Regiment, stationed at Mudanjiang (now a city in Heilongjiang Province in China).

The new recruits with whom Kenji had been transported were from prefectures in northern

Japan, including Niigata. In the Imperial Japanese Army, the conscription system was administered according to the family's official domicile. His father had kept Niigata as the official domicile for the family, so that was where Kenji was registered for the draft.

"Almost all my classmates from Waseda Jitsugyō commerce school were conscripted into Tokyo units the following year. They ended up serving a very short time in the home islands, digging trenches in preparation for the last stand against the American invasion, but Japan surrendered in August and after the war ended they were able to go home right away. Simply because I was registered in Niigata, I got sent to Manchuria and was then interned in Siberia. A person's fate can be determined by very trivial things.

"When the veteran soldier at our induction told us we were going to Manchuria, I think it was out of pity for us, and to let us say a last farewell to our families. The destination of any military unit was classified information, and ordinarily would not have been divulged. I think he sympathized with these poor nineteen-year-old recruits. After all, he'd had to say goodbye to his own family."

Arriving in Mudanjiang, Kenji and his comrades were in uniform but had no weapons or other equipment. All they had been given when they left Tokyo was a thick section of bamboo they were told to use as a mess kit and a canteen.

"When we arrived in Mudanjiang with these bamboo containers dangling from cords around our necks, the veteran soldiers there gave us some very strange looks. One of them said, 'Is that all there is by way of supplies back home these days?' That about summed it up. All we had was our uniforms. We were a completely unarmed unit."

The Seventeenth Signal Regiment, to which Kenji and the other recruits had been sent, was a unit of the First Area Army. This was an element of the Kwantung Army, which had once prided itself as being the cutting edge of the Imperial Japanese Army in North Asia, but its best units had already been redeployed to the fighting in the South Pacific. Sent as replacements for these seasoned troops, the young recruits were hastily trained and formed into units.

At the base, officers and noncommissioned officers were allocated separate quarters, but the common soldiers lived communally in barracks units (*naimuhan*). Their personal effects and letters were subject to inspection and censorship, and the only privacy they had was in the latrine. Normally the barracks unit would consist of a dozen or so men, with veteran soldiers charged with teaching a roughly equal number of young recruits. But with the wartime mass mobilization, the number of raw recruits had expanded dramatically. In the company of the Seventeenth Signal Regiment to which Kenji belonged, there were five barracks units of about forty men each—and about 150 out of the total of 200 men were greenhorns.

"Having sent its best troops to the South Pacific, the Kwantung Army was little more than a skeleton force. We were young conscripts, not older reservists who had been called up. Even so, like myself, many were not very robust physically."

By 1944, when Kenji was inducted, eligibility for service had been lowered to include individuals classified B-3 in the conscription exams. In addition, the maximum age for service had been raised from forty to forty-five, while the standard age for conscription was lowered from twenty to nineteen. Kenji had been called up as a result of these changes in

the conscription system. Among the five barracks units in Kenji's company, the fourth and fifth had a large number of conscripts who were not in very good physical condition; Kenji was assigned to Unit Four.

In those days, upon induction into the Imperial Japanese Army, new recruits spent three months in a barracks unit undergoing basic training, and then would be classified for further service according to their performance in training and their prior educational level. Individuals who had completed secondary school or higher were eligible after three months to take officer candidate exams. If they passed, they would be promoted to private first-class. Then, on the basis of their performance during their next three months of service, they would be divided into Class A (officer) and Class B (noncommissioned officer) candidates, and at the end of their first full year of service they would be promoted to the appropriate rank.

Individuals with no more than a higher elementary school education could be promoted to private first-class if they performed with excellence during the three months of basic training, in what was called the "first cut." Then, three months later, the "second cut" determined who would advance to the rank of superior private, opening the way to promotion to NCO rank.

A fairly large percentage of soldiers who failed to be promoted after the first three months of basic training managed three months later to pass the "second cut" and advance to the rank of private first-class. And even those who failed both cuts would be promoted to private first-class at the end of their first year. But a soldier who had a poor work attitude or habit, or who was seen as a troublemaker by his superiors, might find himself a permanent private first-class who never saw another promotion. The institutional culture of the military not only valued academic achievement, but was also competitive with regard to performance.

As a secondary school graduate, Kenji was eligible to sit for the officer candidate exam, and when he was inducted in Tokyo he was placed in charge of six other new recruits. At Fuji Telecommunications he had been an efficient worker, but during the long period of train travel to Manchuria in the bitter cold of winter he developed a severe case of diarrhea that weakened him considerably. "As I lost strength, my judgment dulled and my thinking got cloudy. Although I'd initially been given a leadership position, I was slow to respond to orders, couldn't think quickly enough, and made a lot of mistakes. I was pretty worthless, as far as the army was concerned."

Kenji's performance was poor, but after completing three months of basic training he still sat for the officer candidate exam, in part because each company was competing with the others in terms of how many candidates it could field.

"When heading to the regimental headquarters to take the exam, we were made to stand in four columns in order of our performance ratings. I was about the fifth from the end of the line."

Almost inevitably, Kenji failed the exam. He also failed to make the second cut at six months, remaining a private second-class until the surrender. As only about a quarter of the men failed both cuts like this, Kenji must have been a very poor soldier indeed.

The barracks chief, an NCO, was nominally in charge of training the new recruits, but in

fact it was the veteran soldiers who dominated the process. Life in the barracks unit followed an absolutely fixed routine—reveille, dressing, inspection, meals, training, cleaning and other chores, sleep—and if your reactions were slow or the maintenance of your rifle poor, or if one of the “vets” was simply in a bad mood, you would be punched or slapped. “There was never a day I didn’t get hit. I often counted how many times it happened in one day.” Such beatings by veteran soldiers were termed “unofficial punishment” and forbidden by regulations, but were actually endemic to the Japanese military at the time.

Prior to the Second Sino-Japanese War, the term of service in the army was two years, after which soldiers were demobilized. But with the expansion of the war effort, this became impossible, and the number of three- and four-year soldiers rapidly grew. Naturally enough, soldiers who had lost hope of demobilization and were confined to these barracks units grew restive and intractable. A culture developed honoring time in service over rank, and basic training began to take on the character of a hazing conducted by the seasoned soldiers.

According to Kenji, “Not all of the vets were violent. It seemed like the quickest to lash out were mostly guys who hadn’t advanced as fast as their peers.” The ones who stayed private first-class year after year reigned over their juniors regardless of rank, and were addressed not as “Private” but as “Sir Veteran Soldier” (*kohei-dono*). At the end of February 1945 a directive explicitly forbidding “unofficial punishment” was promulgated. But Kenji remembers that “the second- and third-year soldiers were running riot. The ban was completely ineffective.” The expansion of the war and the deterioration of Japan’s military position were factors in the rampant abuse, which could not be reined in simply through formal directives. In fact, it was this sort of petty bureaucratism, even more than the violence, that left Kenji with some of his strongest impressions of the Imperial Japanese Army.

“We had to memorize what were called the ‘Regulations,’ which included the Infantry Manual, the Operational Duties Manual, and the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors. But they didn’t care whether you understood the content or not—you simply had to parrot it back word for word. One of the ‘vets’ would say, ‘The Imperial Rescript lists five precepts the soldier must observe and practice. What are they?’ You couldn’t simply answer, ‘The five are loyalty, courtesy, courage, honesty, and frugality.’ You had to say, ‘One: The soldier should consider loyalty his essential duty. Two: The soldier must always observe proper courtesy...’ and so on. And even with the Infantry Manual, which was about combat tactics, you had to answer with the exact wording of the original—it had to be ‘maintain vigilance of your surroundings’ and not ‘watch out for what is around you.’ It was all empty form; you had to make a show of doing exactly what your superiors told you.

“It was the same with equipment or supplies. Submitted paperwork had to be very precise about the numbers and amounts issued, but if the paperwork was in order and the numbers added up, that was all that mattered. If there were shortfalls in the barracks unit, somebody would be held responsible, so stuff got stolen from other companies to make up the difference. There was a lot of such thievery going on.

“For example, there was a drying yard where the new recruits would dry the laundry, and if a company did not mount a special guard over it, things would be stolen by soldiers from other companies. When you were washing dishes after mess, if you dropped anything and reached down to get it something else might be stolen, so you had to put your foot on what you dropped to prevent someone from getting at it, finish the washing, and only reach down

when you had called out to a buddy to keep an eye on everything.

“I had my shirt stolen, and one of the ‘vets’ helped me out by steal- ing someone else’s. So I can’t moralize about this, but no one was thinking about the big picture. All anyone cared about was not get- ting held responsible for anything by their superiors.”

After entering the army, Kenji began to smoke the cigarettes that were issued as part of their rations. New recruits had absolutely no free time, and the few moments when they were in the latrine or given a break during training to smoke were the only times they could relax without fear of reprimand.

Midway through basic training, Kenji sent a photo of himself to his father, Yūji. “The army back then was very much concerned with keeping up surface appearances, so they had us send these pictures to our families to show that we were all healthy and happy and fulfilling our duties. Everything was censored, so of course you couldn’t write to them about how you were being beaten every day.” Kenji’s letters home from the army went to Yūji, as his grandfather Ishichi had become too old and frail to entrust with any business that might need taking care of on Kenji’s behalf.

After completing his three months of basic training, Kenji was assigned to the Second Air Signal Regiment, stationed at Ning’an, about twenty kilometers southwest of Mudanjiang. This was a unit of the Second Air Army responsible for wireless communications between the airfield and its planes, as well as ground communications within and out of the air base. Kenji, in poor physical condition and underperform- ing, remained a private second-class. He felt humiliated, because other secondary school grads who had entered with him and had, like him, been assigned as group leaders were now already officer candidates. In the Second Air Signal Regiment, the best soldiers were assigned to First Company—Kenji was put in Eighth Company.

Kenji’s new barracks was on the outskirts of town about two kilo- meters east of the Ning’an rail station; the small airfield was located near the station. The three months of basic training had been extremely tense and terribly busy; after arriving in Ning’an he suddenly had a lot of time on his hands. There were no longer any airplanes in this area, so the Second Air Signal Regiment had nothing to do.

“I only saw one airplane the entire time I was there. Around May of 1945, a single-engine training plane touched down briefly and flew off again. That was it. We didn’t have much by way of communications equipment, either. Since it wouldn’t do to have the regiment completely idle, they’d sent us off occasionally to do construction and maintenance work at the airfield, but most of the time there wasn’t much to do. So we farmed a bit, or harvested edible wild plants.

“While we were loafing around like this, in April 1945 some of the other companies got a sudden influx of new recruits, who were subjected to brutal hazing. Like us, this batch seemed to have been shipped out purely to be taken prisoner by the Soviets and sent to Siberia.”

The Second Air Signal Regiment was primarily composed of young conscripts who, like Kenji, were new recruits freshly dis- patched from the home islands. There was a shortage of officers as well. Normally a company would be commanded by a captain, but Kenji’s Eighth Company was headed by a young second lieutenant just out of accelerated training. The

battalion commander was a superannuated major who had retired from service but had been called back to active duty.

“Once when I was out working in the fields I saw the elderly battalion commander ride up on a horse. It was the only time I ever laid eyes on him. And of course I never even saw the regimental commander.”

Kenji was given basic instruction in code transmission and field medicine, but never had the opportunity to apply what he had learned. During basic training at Mudanjiang he had been issued a rifle of his own, but in the Second Air Signal Regiment there was only one rifle for every four or five men. The only weapon everyone had was a long bayonet nicknamed the “burdock knife.” Kenji does not remember ever wearing a helmet.

In basic training Kenji was taught how to clean and service his rifle, but not how to shoot it, and right to the surrender he never had occasion to pull a trigger. The only time he ever fired a rifle was once in his third year at Waseda Jitsugyō, as part of the mandatory secondary school military instruction program. The first-year soldiers were not allowed to leave the barracks, so Kenji never went to visit the shops in Ning’an, never went to a comfort station, and never had any contact with the Chinese population.

As mentioned earlier, the Kwantung Army had been gutted to provide experienced troops for the South Pacific battlefield and the defense of Okinawa and the home islands and so, beginning in January 1945, a number of completely new units were created within it. Core personnel for the units were drawn from existing units, augmented by fresh recruits from Japan and veterans among Japanese colonists in Manchuria who were called up locally. But these new units were inadequate in both training and equipment.

The Second Air Signal Regiment was a long-established unit, but by the time Kenji joined it key personnel had been siphoned off and replaced with new recruits, so in reality it was in a sorry state, as Kenji discovered. Despite the tide of war clearly turning against the Japanese forces, nothing was done to prepare trenches or other defense works, nor did the soldiers receive any real training. Kenji explains: “The army was a bureaucracy. Orders came down to organize a unit and station it somewhere, and this would be done, at least on paper—but without orders, nothing would happen. From basic training we were beaten if we didn’t follow orders to the letter, but we weren’t taught to think for ourselves and no one expected us to. It never even occurred to us to think of what we would do if the enemy suddenly showed up.” Similar recollections are common in the postwar memoirs of other veterans of the Imperial Japanese Army. Even in the fiercely contested battlefields of the Pacific such as Saipan and Leyte, the troops were left to loaf about and did little to prepare for attack until the enemy was almost upon them. What Kenji experienced appears to have been far from unusual.

Meanwhile, the war situation continued to deteriorate. The Philippine front collapsed. American forces landed on Iwo Jima in February and on the main island of Okinawa in April. On 10 March 1945, a massive firebombing raid on Tokyo killed more than a hundred thousand people.

There was no way for ordinary soldiers overseas to stay informed of the enormity of what was happening. In March 1945, Kenji received a postcard from a former classmate at Waseda Jitsugyō saying, “Recently carrier planes have been appearing in the skies over Tokyo.” This was a reference to a raid from US aircraft carriers that had struck Tokyo on 15

February. Mail to and from the military was censored: "What he wrote was about as much as you could get past the censors at that point." In April, he received a postcard from Ishichi saying that he and Kochiyo had been forced to relocate to Okayama.

With ample leisure after being stationed with the Second Air Signal Regiment, Kenji had time to read the newspapers posted in the canteen—which no longer had food for sale. According to Kenji, about all that was left in stock was toilet paper. But he did go there to read the newspapers, which were full of stories of kamikaze raids off Okinawa sinking enemy carriers and battleships. Kenji was shocked to learn, after the war, that those had all been lies.

But the Japanese military was unable to see the situation objectively. The international news, which Kenji continued to follow as he had been in the habit of doing since secondary school, played up information that was even slightly favorable to Japan. In July 1945, a month before Japan's surrender, Churchill's cabinet resigned when the Conservatives lost the House of Commons election to the Labour Party. This news was written large on the blackboard in front of the officers' briefing room at Second Air Signal Regiment headquarters.

The massive 10 March 1945 air raid on Tokyo happened to coincide with Army Day, commemorating the Japanese victory in the Battle of Mukden during the Russo-Japanese War. Kenji and other first-year soldiers, who at that point were still undergoing basic training, were assembled in a lecture hall to listen to an address by the company commander, a captain in his late twenties who had graduated from the Imperial Japanese Army Academy. The gist of his talk: "When the end comes, we must die by our own hand rather than be taken prisoner. At that time, take a hand grenade, charge into the midst of the enemy, and take as many of them with you as you can!"

Nineteen-year-old Kenji was not in any position to judge the situation objectively. Even when instructed in this way to carry out a suicide attack rather than surrender, the most he thought once he was back in barracks was, "I wonder if I could really do that . . . Probably not."

"It was a given that we were supposed to die rather than be captured, and I couldn't think beyond that. It seemed the only choice were to kill yourself, be killed by the enemy, or take a few of them with you in death."

In May they were told that Hitler had died in combat and Germany had surrendered. Hitler had of course committed suicide, but the German government had announced that he had died fighting Soviet forces in front of the Reich Chancellery. That was what was conveyed to Kenji, who says, "I thought, 'Hitler had the courage of his convictions.' What I didn't think about was what the German defeat meant for Japan."

On 26 July 1945 the Allies issued the Potsdam Declaration calling for Japan's unconditional surrender. Kenji read the newspaper report of this in the canteen. "The article was brief, but it mentioned that Japan would maintain sovereignty over the four main islands, and I thought to myself, 'At least they'll let us keep the territory we had up to the time of the First Sino-Japanese War.' Up to that point all I had been hearing about was the 'Anglo-American devils' and how they were going to massacre us all, so it seemed surprisingly generous to me that they intended to let Japan survive as a country."

Kenji's heretofore peaceful existence was shattered on 9 August 1945. At dawn that day, Soviet forces attacked across the Manchurian border.

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The Soviet attack was carried out with overwhelmingly superior force. The German surrender had freed the Soviets to redeploy troops from the European front, allowing them to assemble a force of 1,580,000 men, 5,556 tanks and self-propelled artillery, and 3,446 aircraft. Against this, Japan's Kwantung Army was able to field only about 700,000 men and about 200 tanks and 200 airplanes.

The Kwantung Army was taken completely by surprise. Its leaders believed that the Soviet army had exhausted itself on the European front and that any plans it might have for advancing into Manchuria would begin in September at the earliest, or at latest in the coming year. Even so, on 10 July 1945 the Kwantung Army commenced an "all-out mobilization" of 250,000 men from among Japanese colonists in Manchuria to flesh out its troop strength, but the result merely expanded the number of nominal units, poorly equipped and trained.

Since the central command of the Kwantung Army had not anticipated the Soviet offensive, the front-line units were not combat ready. Some of these units had reported as early as 3 August that large Soviet forces were massing near the border, but central command did not change its assessment of the situation. As a result, the attack of 9 August was a surprise for the Japanese forces.

On that day Kenji was assigned to night watch. At 5:00 am he completed his shift, reported to his replacement that there was no unusual activity, and went back to the barracks to go to sleep. Suddenly, a trumpet sounded. It was actually an emergency warning, but he mistook it for reveille and shouted, "Everybody up!" Others took up the cry, and all the soldiers arose. They started heading to the barracks yard to form ranks for inspection as they normally would, but an order was issued that no one was to leave the building. They waited there, learning about 6:30 am that the trumpet had signaled an emergency and that the Soviet forces were attacking.

When orders finally came, they were to bring rations, signal equipment, and other supplies to the railway station at Ning'an. The enlisted men had no way to judge what was going on, and simply carried out the orders they were given.

"Every available cart and man was mobilized to load all the supplies and equipment onto freight cars. The army always wanted everything orderly, so you never set foot in the barracks in boots; you had to change into indoor shoes. But on the following day, 10 August, we were all running around the buildings with our boots on, so there was a real sense of emergency."

The train with Kenji and his unit on board departed for Mudanjiang on the afternoon of 10 August. The Kwantung Army had issued an order for withdrawal into South Manchuria. "The boxcars were filled with supplies and equipment, and the soldiers loaded in on top of that. I had neither a rifle nor a helmet. I think the officers rode in passenger cars."

As they approached the outskirts of Mudanjiang, a report came in that the city was under Soviet bombardment, and the train was halted. When they got down out of their boxcars to

look around, they saw Soviet planes dive-bombing the streets of Mudanjiang. When the air raid was over, the train entered the station. It was raining, but the flames of the burning city lit the night as brightly as day.

There were some 60,000 Japanese residents of Mudanjiang, and the station was filled with Japanese civilian families seeking refuge. But the Imperial Japanese Army had no thought of using military trains to evacuate them.

“At any rate, no civilian refugees boarded our train. I think almost all of them were left at the station. At the time no consideration or thought was given to such people.”

There were approximately 1.5 million Japanese colonists living in Manchuria then. The Kwantung Army was well aware that it would be impossible to stop a Soviet advance at the Manchurian border, and had developed a strategy to withdraw to a line of defense near the Korean border. Prior evacuation of civilians was rejected because it would give away this plan of operations. So even before the fighting started, a de facto decision had been made to abandon any attempt to protect the Japanese civilian population. Quite understandably, this became a source of great resentment against the army among former Japanese colonists in Manchuria.



Map of main railways in Siberia, based on map in Japanese prisoners of war in Siberia by Kurihara Toshi. (Iwanami Shinsho, 2009.)

After the Soviet incursion began, the Kwantung Army did engage in some evacuation efforts, but priority was given to the families of military personnel and government officials. There were about 140,000 Japanese colonists in Hsinking (now Changchun), the capital of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo, which, since its establishment in 1932 following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, lay under the de facto control of the Kwantung Army and the large number of Japanese civilian bureaucrats dispatched to help administer it. The semi-governmental South Manchurian Railway Corporation (Mantetsu), founded in 1906 after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War, also possessed significant influence in the region.

From before dawn until midday on 11 August, eighteen railway trains evacuated some 38,000 Japanese from Hsinking: approximately 20,310 were members of military families, 750 were family members of embassy and other government officials, and 16,700 were family members of employees of Mantetsu.⁴ A bit of simple arithmetic suggests that fewer than 300 ordinary civilians were evacuated.

In cities like Mudanjiang that were closer to the Soviet border, the situation was even more dire, although there is little detailed information available. Mudanjiang was occupied by Soviet forces on 13 August, and there was a massacre of Japanese civilians. In *Akai tsuki* (Red Moon), a novel by Nakanishi Rei based on his personal experience as a civilian in Mudanjiang, military men and their families are evacuated from the city on a special train that ordinary civilians are not allowed to board without permission.⁵ It is estimated that, of the approximately 1.5 million Japanese civilians in Manchuria, ultimately about 180,000 died.⁶

The military train carrying Kenji and his unit passed through Harbin and arrived on 15 August in the city of Fengtian (now Shenyang). It was on this day that the emperor announced Japan's surrender to the Japanese people in an unprecedented radio broadcast. Kenji and his comrades did not hear the broadcast, but a rumor went around that Japan had surrendered, which the officers roundly denied, calling it impossible.

Kenji and his unit spent 17 August in Fenghuangcheng, between Fengtian and Andong (now the city of Dandong in Liaoning Province), where they were finally informed of Japan's defeat. Kenji recalls his feelings at that time:

"When they told us, I was upset; I hadn't thought that Japan could lose. But after about twenty minutes I thought to myself, 'Wait a minute. This means I can go home and see my family,' and that made me happy. You couldn't let that show, so I kept quiet about it, but I think everyone felt that way."

The other thing that occurred to Kenji when he learned of the surrender was, "Hey, now I won't have to spend the rest of my life as a permanent private."

"In Japan in those days, the Imperial Reservists Association was a very big deal. In local society, your rank when you were in the army followed you around. Particularly in rural areas you'd often hear things like, 'He made superior private on the first cut. That's the kind of guy you want your daughter to marry.' A failed soldier like me would be stigmatized after being demobilized and sent home. But now that we'd lost the war, that seemed unlikely."

It seems that at times of radical changes in the social order, when people cannot see what the future holds, it is difficult for them to alter established patterns of thought. Given the changes that were in store for a demilitarized Japanese society after the defeat, Kenji's relief at not having to live under the stigma of being a poor soldier seems a bit wide of the mark, an example of not being able to see the future except as an extension of the social conventions of prewar Japan. Yet at the same time, Kenji was accurate in sensing the impending demise of militarism in Japanese society. If we look at history, the judgment of ordinary people may be wrong in some of the details, but it is frequently correct in grasping the broad outline of events.

The young second lieutenant who commanded Kenji's Eighth Company attempted to commit ritual suicide the following morning with his army sword, and failed. The human abdomen is well padded with fat and difficult to pierce with a blade, so disemboweling oneself is no easy matter. In the Edo period (1603-1867), when a samurai committed seppuku it was largely a formality—normally a second would be standing by to cut off the man's head as soon as the cut to the abdomen was made. Not knowing this, the young second lieutenant tried to disembowel himself, but ended up with no more than a wound that healed after a couple of weeks.

After being informed of the surrender, Kenji's unit was transferred to Andong, just north of the mouth of the Yalu River on the border with Korea, and split up among different billets. Kenji and his comrades stayed in a corporate dormitory that had been used by Japanese colonists. There was nothing to do, so they passed the time by talking with the Japanese who were still there. This was how they learned of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the nearly total destruction of the Combined Fleet. They were told of the terrifying destructive power of the atomic weapons, but did not understand much about them.

Kenji and the others continued to wait in the corporate dorm for further instructions. On 28 August or so, they were ordered by one of their officers to put their weapons away in a corner of the dorm. Kenji only had a bayonet, but he was now officially disarmed.

While they were awaiting orders, the men received their August wages from company headquarters. Soldiers' wages were ordinarily paid into national postal savings accounts, which the government then used to help finance the military budget. But now the postal service had broken down and they were paid in cash for the first time. Without anything better to do, the men spent the money buying things to eat from the Chinese.

"My wages were being paid into a postal savings account, but I'd never even seen the passbook for it, so when we got our pay this time, I realized for the first time that I was making about ¥15 [equivalent to about \$500 today] a month. The army being a government bureaucracy, when it withdrew it had carted along all its paperwork, right down to our pay slips and the company commander's seal." Later, with the postwar inflation and the de facto writing off of government debt, the money in Kenji's account would be rendered practically worthless.

From the company dorm they could easily see the railway bridge over the Yalu River defining the border between Manchuria and Korea. But no trains were passing on the bridge. Over meals, the soldiers talked about this, saying, "When trains start crossing the bridge again, we'll probably be able to go home." A veteran first sergeant who was the company clerk warned the young soldiers spending their money on food, "You guys are going to have trouble coming up with the money for your return ticket." Kenji thought, "Since it was the government that brought us here, what is this talk about us having to pay for the return trip?"

After more waiting in Andong, they were loaded into troop trains again, which made typically slow progress with many halts for schedule adjustments, reaching Fengtian on 15 September or so. It was in the streets of Fengtian that Kenji first saw Soviet troops.

A few days later, around 20 September, Kenji and the other Japanese prisoners of war were assembled in a walled campus in the Beiling district of Fengtian. There had been a medical college and a normal school there, but Kenji is unclear as to which campus it was. Other units and individual Japanese military personnel from the area were sent there along with Kenji's Second Air Signal Regiment. "Orders were always given to us directly by our own officers. I imagine the Soviet forces intentionally maintained the Japanese army unit structure and gave orders for movement and assembly to the Japanese commanders."

Eventually the POWs were formed into battalions of about a thousand men each for transfer. "The organization was carried out by the Japanese officers, I believe. At the Beiling campus, Kwantung Army officers handled the administrative work. We thought they were getting us organized for the return trip to Japan. Nobody had any information, and among the troops there were never even any rumors of Siberia. Soviet troops were standing guard in the assembly camp, but the orders were being given solely by Japanese officers. No one even imagined we were going to Siberia."

The 29 August 1945 communication sent by the general headquarters of the Kwantung Army to the Soviets concerning the treatment of captured Japanese military personnel contained the following statement: "Until such time as they can be repatriated [to the home islands] we earnestly hope that you will utilize them in any way conducive to cooperation

with your forces.”⁷ In fact, the “Outline for Peace Negotiations,” drafted in July 1945 by former prime minister Konoe Fumimaro under orders from the emperor himself, earmarked Japanese army personnel and civilian auxiliaries in Manchuria to provide labor to the Soviet Union as part of a war reparations plan. The hope had been that by offering this bargaining chip, the Japanese government might have the Soviet Union serve as an intermediary in negotiations with the Allied powers.

However, the Soviet Union had already pledged at the February 1945 Yalta Conference to enter the war against Japan within two to three months after the cessation of hostilities against Germany, and in fact the Soviet attack on Manchuria took place almost exactly three months after the German surrender. After Japan surrendered, transport of Japanese POWs, planned in advance, was initiated by a top-secret order from Stalin dated 23 August 1945. The Japanese attempts to negotiate with the Soviets had been quixotic, but Kenji and his comrades had no way of knowing any of the background to what was happening to them.

Among the POWs at Beiling were many Japanese colonists drafted during the “all-out mobilization” that had taken place just before the surrender. Kenji recalls that one day around the middle of September a decidedly nonmilitary-looking group of Japanese showed up in Beiling, some of them still wearing wooden *geta* sandals.

“‘Hey, the locals have arrived!’ The word passed quickly among us. When we talked with the new arrivals, we learned that Japanese colonists who had been called up for military service had been demobilized and sent home immediately after the surrender. But then all former military personnel were ordered to present themselves at their local police headquarters to receive documents of demobilization. When they did, they were met by armed Soviet troops who escorted them to Beiling. I imagine that the Japanese military had been given a quota to fill by the Soviets, and had rounded out the numbers by calling these guys up again. In Beiling they were issued Japanese military uniforms that they were made to wear.

“Some guys had gone out to do a bit of shopping for their wives and stopped at the police station on their way home, only to wind up getting taken to the Beiling camp and sent to Siberia. They were bitterly resentful of the neighborhood and block association leaders who delivered the orders but didn’t go themselves. Some of them said, ‘When we get back to Japan, we’re taking them to court!’ Others had sensed something fishy about this summons, and simply ignored it, but not many. Your ordinary honest soul was the most likely to trust his superiors and fall into the trap.”

Kenji told these local vets how his troop train had left the rest of the Japanese population behind when it withdrew through Mudanjiang. The men shrugged this off, saying, “That’s the army for you,” but they were worried about their families. “And for some of them that must have been a final farewell,” Kenji says.

Most of the POWs, Kenji included, did not attempt to escape from the Beiling camp. “Soviet guards were stationed at strategic points, and at night there was sometimes gunfire. I think a few local veterans who could speak Chinese or had families in the area managed to escape. But I didn’t know a word of Chinese. If I left my unit, how was I going to eat? So I just stayed with everyone in the battalion we had been formed into. I had no idea we were going to be sent to Siberia.”

After about a week at the assembly camp, Kenji boarded another train for transport out of

Fengtian. The Second Air Signal Regiment had already shipped out. But Kenji was weakened by diarrhea; he and about twenty others in poor physical condition were left behind. “The army was a bureaucratic organization. If you got in the way, you got left behind. It makes perfect sense that they didn’t bother to protect civilians, either.”

But in this case, Kenji was fortunate.

“Looking back on it now, it was one of the reasons I survived. If I’d been sent to Siberia with my original unit, with no fresh men coming in, in the labor camp I would have been treated very badly at the very bottom of the pecking order. I would have been last in line for food. I’ve read a bunch of memoirs of Siberia published after the war, and there are many examples of this sort of thing—the death rate was highest among new recruits. If I’d been sent with my original unit, given my clumsiness and my poor physical condition, I probably would have been dead that first winter in Siberia.”

Kenji and the other stragglers from the Second Air Signal Regiment were incorporated into the newly formed Fengtian Fifty- Second Battalion. This was made up of a headquarters unit and six companies, amounting to about a thousand men altogether. Kenji was in Fourth Company, which had been cobbled together out of number of smaller units, stragglers like Kenji, and “locals” drafted in the all-out mobilization of July and August.

“The ‘locals’ were men in their thirties and forties and treated us stragglers from the Second Air Signal Regiment like children. But they’d been civilians until only recently, and the customs and prerogatives of the army meant nothing to them. Because of this, even after we were sent to Siberia, at least in the camp I was in, former officers were not able to get away with overt attempts to pull rank or cheat on food distribution. This is another reason I was able to survive.”

Around 25 September, Kenji and the rest of the Fengtian Fifty- Second Battalion were loaded into a freight train departing from Huanggutun Station in the northern part of Fengtian. The train, pulled by a steam locomotive, was made up almost entirely of boxcars. There were only two passenger cars with standard seating, and the headquarters staff rode in these; everyone else was loaded into the boxcars, which had been divided into two levels with plank flooring to hold about a hundred men per car. There was a plank walkway along the roof of each car, and this was where the Soviet guards rode. The full moon was on 23 September that year; Kenji recalls thinking how beautiful the moon was, seen from the former campus on the eve of their departure.

When the train with Kenji and the others aboard departed from Fengtian, they all still believed that it was taking them home to Japan.

3

After leaving Fengtian, the train headed north. If they were being taken to Japan, it should have been going south. But the POWs still did not imagine they were being sent to Siberia.

“When the train headed north, we figured it must be going to the port of Vladivostok by way of Harbin. But we passed through Harbin, and were still going north. Then a rumor went round that the railway bridge had been destroyed in the fighting and we were going to Vladivostok by way of Blagoveshchensk. People never want to believe the worst. They always want to hold onto optimistic projections.”

The POWs squatted in more or less random groups on the two levels inside the boxcars. They had been thrown together so quickly that military organization had not really taken hold. "You just bunched together with familiar faces."

Numerous other trains were carrying prisoners on the same track, forcing Kenji's train to halt time and again when trains were backed up ahead. During the waits the train would take on coal and water. Most of the stations looked to be in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by flat plains. When the train halted it might be hours before it moved again; but once it started up again it seemed as if it would go on forever.

The boxcars had no toilets, so the men either waited for the next stop or did their business through holes in the floorboards. As long as the train was running, it was impossible to cook meals. Each man had been given about two kilos of Russian black bread, but it was so sour-tasting that everyone rejected it, preferring to eat the rice and other grains they had first been supplied with.

"When the locomotive stopped for water we'd have time to cook the grains or rice in the Japanese fashion—but this required lighting a fire. I'd never encountered Russian black bread before. It seemed pretty convenient, since you could survive on bread and water alone. When the train wouldn't stop, we started out eating the grain raw, then finally started chewing on the bread."

The train would stop without warning, precipitating frantic efforts to stock water and cook food. At each stop, there would be a tank of water for resupplying the locomotive. As they had no buckets, the POWs used their mess kits to collect water, which would have to last until the next stop.

The biggest problem with cooking during these stops was finding an adequate supply of fuel. Since formal unit organization was not functioning, groups of buddies would scour the surrounding area for dry grass, burnable wood, and threshed straw to feed the cook fires. Often they would find the immediate area had already been picked clean by earlier POW trains. With nothing left near at hand that would burn, they had to range farther afield, where some were way-laid by local thieves. When the train signal sounded, there was a great panic not to be left behind. It might seem odd to be so afraid of being left behind by a train that was taking you to internment in Siberia. But these men had very limited information on which to judge their situation. "I had no idea of what was going to happen to us. With no knowledge of the local languages, running away seemed futile. I just tried to keep up with everybody else."

Many memoirs of Siberian internment recall that Soviet guards lied and answered "Domoy" (home) when asked where the trains were going, and that this was why there was so little resistance to being shipped to Siberia on the part of the Japanese troops. But Kenji says, "I heard rumors of the guards saying such things, but I never heard anything like it directly. At the time, everybody desperately wanted to go home and all sorts of hopeful rumors were flying about, so I think it likely that this was rumored more often than it was actually said."

According to the postwar newsletter published by surviving members of Kenji's Fengtian Fifty-Second Battalion, no more than a couple of dozen members escaped after departing Fengtian.⁸ Kenji's recollection is that most of the escapes happened immediately after the train left Fengtian, and that the last occurred at Beian (now part of the city of Heihe in Heilongjiang Province).

“The Soviet soldiers on the roofs of the boxcars were equipped with submachine guns. I heard gunfire in the night on at least one occasion, so I think there were men trying to escape. The ones who did were probably guys who had been locally drafted and knew how to speak Chinese.”

When they stopped, local people would approach the train to barter with the Japanese POWs. Kenji traded his military-issue leather belt for food. Such trades were usually for ready-to-eat items such as boiled corn-on-the-cob and steamed buns. Some of the colonists who had been drafted into the battalion at Beiling and outfitted with uniforms traded their civilian clothes for food.

For Kenji, who had been abandoned by his original unit and was weak from diarrhea, the train trip was arduous. “When we stopped to get water and such, it was no problem for the guys who were smart and fast on their feet, but I was always slow off the mark. Since the unit had just been thrown together, there was no sense of group solidarity—if you couldn’t fend for yourself, no one was going to help you.”

Eventually, after passing through Harbin, the train pulled into Beian, where it stopped. The POWs spent a week waiting there, still on the train.

“In Beian, I saw that a Japanese war memorial in the central square had been knocked down. When I think about it today, it only makes perfect sense. The memorial was a symbol of the period of Japanese rule. Of course the local people wouldn’t just leave it standing in the middle of the city square.”

Then, on about 10 October, the train proceeded to Heihe, on the Soviet border, where Kenji and the other prisoners disembarked. At Beian they had passed a train full of Japanese civilians headed south, but in Heihe there were no longer any Japanese. The streets of the city had been damaged by Soviet artillery fire. On the other side of the Amur River was Blagoveshchensk, administrative center of the Amur Oblast of the Soviet Union.

The POWs were put to work loading river barges hauling goods the Soviet army had looted from Manchuria, mostly foodstuffs such as soybeans and sorghum. The prisoners carried bags weighing around fifty kilos apiece across gangplanks onto the barges, which were manned and operated by Russians. This work continued for about a week, at the end of which the POWs were ferried across the river in the same barges. Kenji remembers it as 17 October, because one of his fellow POWs said it was the date of the local festival back home.

It was raining when they arrived in Blagoveshchensk on the other side of the Amur, but no lodgings had been prepared for them. The POWs spent a night sheltering under the eaves of a building, and the next day dug trenches in the middle of a field. Using the tarps they carried as part of their field kit, they roofed these over, dug drainage ditches around the perimeter, and sheltered there from the rain—if not the cold. For about another week in Blagoveshchensk they were put to work unloading barges they had loaded on the other side.

From Blagoveshchensk there were trains running to join the main line of the Trans-Siberian Railway. After the men had worked for a total of more than ten days on both sides of the Amur River, the Fengtian Fifty-Second Battalion was loaded onto a train on the evening of 25 October, departing Blagoveshchensk in the middle of the night.

The next morning the POWs looked at the direction of the sun and debated whether the train was running northeast or southwest. The train shifted direction so many times that it was difficult to tell for sure. But that afternoon, the direction of the sun made it clear that they were westward bound, deeper into Soviet territory. Kenji recalls, "After that, everyone was pretty downcast, and no one had much of anything to say."

Having entered the Soviet Union, they were now more stringently guarded, and not permitted to disembark except to relieve themselves. A kitchen car had been coupled to the train to which they had been transferred in the Soviet Union, and large metal pots of porridge were distributed to each of the cars carrying the prisoners, who no longer cooked outside. The black bread they had been issued in Fengtian was long gone, and even those who still had some mixed grain had no way of cooking it—though when something interfered with the food distribution, they would nibble on it raw.

At least one soldier who, like Kenji, had been left behind by the Second Air Signal Regiment continued to decline physically during the long journey and eventually disappeared from the train.

"I think it was about the third day after we left Blagoveshchensk. It was a fourth-year soldier who was one of the 'permanent privates.' To remain a permanent private you either had to be a problem in terms of your thought or behavior, or else really be incompetent as a soldier. The reason for this guy was that he was somewhat mentally retarded. A person like that was a burden to a unit, which was why he had been left behind. He was always on the losing end of food distribution, work assignments, and so on.

"He couldn't fetch water, or collect firewood, or cook, and it got to the point where all he did was lie in the boxcar. Some of his buddies looked after him for a while, but when things got tough, everyone was basically looking out for themselves. In the end, he became a kind of phantom no one even thought about anymore, and he just disappeared. I imagine that he was put off the train on the pretext he was going to a 'hospital,' but we were passing through quite desolate territory without any towns in sight that might have had a hospital. There wasn't any system set up for helping someone like that, and I doubt he survived."

The same was later true in Siberia, but Kenji did not directly witness anyone's death. "This was true of most of us. It wasn't like the movies or novels. People simply vanished at some point."

On the afternoon of 28 October, about a month after departing Fengtian, the train passed through the central railway station of a major city and arrived at a switchyard outside the city. After being made to wait for an hour or so in the boxcars, the POWs were ordered to disembark in the darkness. They were divided into three groups: the first consisted of First and Second companies, the second of battalion headquarters and Third and Fourth companies (Kenji's unit), and the third of Fifth and Sixth companies.

When they passed through the central rail station the POWs realized the city was Chita. Chita was the administrative center of the Chita Oblast of the Soviet Union (now Zabaykalsky Krai in the Siberian Federal District), and in the nineteenth century had been known as Tsarist Russia's "City of Exiles." Japanese military maps had shown no towns of any consequence west of Blagoveshchensk until Chita, so the prisoners realized from the scale of the city alone that it must be Chita.

After they disembarked from the train, a steam whistle sounded, indicating it was 5:00 pm. Kenji recalls what a truly mournful sound it was for these men who had no idea what was going to happen to them next. That day there had been a breakfast ration, but nothing afterward. The hungry men were ordered to start walking in the cold dusk; there was a hint of snow in the air. By this point, all that Kenji possessed was his mess kit and canteen, a tattered military blanket, and a rucksack containing a few other items of daily use.

After a month aboard trains, it was tough being made to march hungry and cold through the evening dark. One of the Japanese officers shouted, by way of encouragement, "It's only a few kilometers more!" The men in one group carried on their shoulders the corpse of one of their number who had died aboard the train.

"They were probably made to carry the corpse to make sure the numbers worked out. The Soviet army transport officer had no doubt been ordered to deliver the entire number of prisoners to the camp. So he would have to deliver them, dead or alive, get the numbers checked by the camp commandant, and receive proper papers in acknowledgment. The military was like that—Soviet army, Japanese army, it was all the same."

The avenues of this sprawling continental city were broad and empty—apart from an occasional streetlight, there were few signs of cars or people. The prisoners passed by concrete buildings and colossal bronze statues of figures they did not know, arriving after about two hours at a cluster of wooden structures. It had been a trip of about five kilometers, but at the time seemed terribly long. Kenji's group stopped there, but the other groups were sent on farther. Kenji never saw them again.

Night was now fully upon them. The exhausted prisoners were in no state to think of what might come next. Relieved simply to have arrived somewhere, they decided who would sleep where in the huge three-tiered bunks and swiftly fell asleep.

For Kenji, this night was the beginning of three years in Twenty-Fourth District Camp No. 2 in Chita.

*

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Notes

¹Handō Kazutoshi, *Soren ga Manshū ni shinkōshita natsu* (Bungei Shunjū, 2002), pp. 231–32.

²Nakanishi Rei, *Akai tsuki*, vol. 1 (Shinchōsha, 2003), pp. 57–59.

³Handō, *Soren ga*, p. 354.

⁴Handō Kazutoshi, *Soren ga Manshū ni shinkōshita natsu* (Bungei Shunjū, 2002), pp. 231–32.

⁵Nakanishi Rei, *Akai tsuki*, vol. 1 (Shinchōsha, 2003), pp. 57–59.

⁶Handō, *Soren ga*, p. 354.

⁷Kwantung Army General Headquarters, “Washirefusukii [Vasilevsky] gensui ni tai- suru hōkoku,” 29 August 1945. Cited in *Horyo taiken ki*, vol. 1, *Rekishi, sōshū hen*, ed. Soren ni Okeru Nihonjin Horyo no Seikatsu Taiken o Kirokusuru Kai (Soren ni Okeru Nihonjin Horyo no Seikatsu Taiken o Kirokusuru Kai, 1998), p. 371.

⁸“Hokuryō [Beiling] kara Maizuru made,” *Chita-kai kaihō* 3 (1982), pp. 29–32. According to the appended note, this chronology (which covers from September 1945 to August 1948) was compiled at a 1981 meeting of the group based on a draft by Kenji recording his own recollections, which the other members worked together to expand.

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